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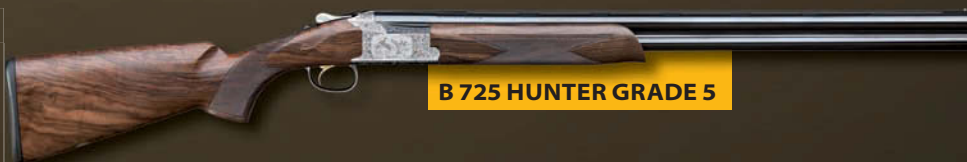


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I have always felt that hunting with gun, rifle or rod affords you a sense of perspective.

I grew up in the mountains of the Southern Drakensberg in South Africa, a spectacular landscape where towering, rocky crags loom high above a vista of undulating valleys, tumbling trout streams and verdant, irrigated pastures. It is largely an agricultural area, but it is also a place where an array of wildlife roams wild and free. And, as kids, so did we. Hunting and fishing were no different to marbles, Monopoly or rugby practice; our school playground was permanently abuzz with tales of high adventure, possible leopard sightings and dubiously large trout.

Time spent outdoors was a key part of our education. Even at school, we trapped all manner of rodents and hunted rock pigeons with our catapults which soon became biltong suspended from the springs beneath our mattresses, out of sight of our house master who was more fond of live pigeons than dead ones. Making our own discoveries about life and death within the wider context of the outdoors taught us things that no book or teacher could impart – a sense of perspective.

I have therefore been taken aback by the apparent reluctance of many in the UK to acknowledge where our meat comes from. In Africa, nothing is wasted and squeamishness only leaves you hungry. I have friends who ensure that every last sinew of any animal killed is utilised. If I were to tell them of the people I have met who will only eat the breast meat of a chicken because the sight of bones or skin reminds them that they are eating an animal, they would be horrified. And perhaps bemused. We have become so detached from the killing of our own food that we find it distasteful. Something has gone badly wrong.

Moreover, anyone who hunts, shoots or stalks is seen as barbaric – by those who pile their plates high with battery-reared chicken. To me, this is a symptom of a society that has tried too hard to remove the important

realities of life and death from our food chain. As a result, hunting and shooting are becoming less and less acceptable to wider society. And you can't blame them.

But, as hunters, we should be proud of what we do. Just because society has contrived a way for somebody else to kill our meat, doesn't mean that the desire to do so ourselves is something we should be ashamed of. As Will Pocklington says on page 44, the hunter-gatherer instinct is still very much etched into our DNA, an intrinsic part of human nature. But, as a race, we have also never lived in such confined and congested environments, detached from Mother Nature. It's no wonder we are losing our sense of perspective.

Technology has certainly made our lives easier, more convenient and faster in many respects. But technology has also deprived us of the one thing that we are all going to run out of: time. We now live in a fibre-optic world of instant everything, where, if you aren't permanently broadcasting and projecting something into cyberspace, you will surely lag behind. As a result, we've never been busier. But to what end?

That is why, in my opinion, hunting and fishing hold such great appeal. Because the behaviour of our quarry hasn't changed, the world they inhabit operates on a diametrically different set of paradigms, from a different time. And they offer us things that our modern lifestyles can't, namely time and space. Our sports also teach us things that, as a society, we seem to have forgotten – patience, to listen, to observe. And to succeed we must broadcast as little as possible, we must remain undetected. Anyone who has ever travelled in Africa will know that in many cultures, haste is an abomination, the sign of a man who has no appreciation for life.

We may have the modern amenities and advantages of the First World, but they, who in our eyes have so little, have exactly what is missing from modern society: a sense of perspective.

Marcus
 Editor

PHOTOGRAPH: WOLF AVNI



The Southern Drakensberg Mountains in South Africa

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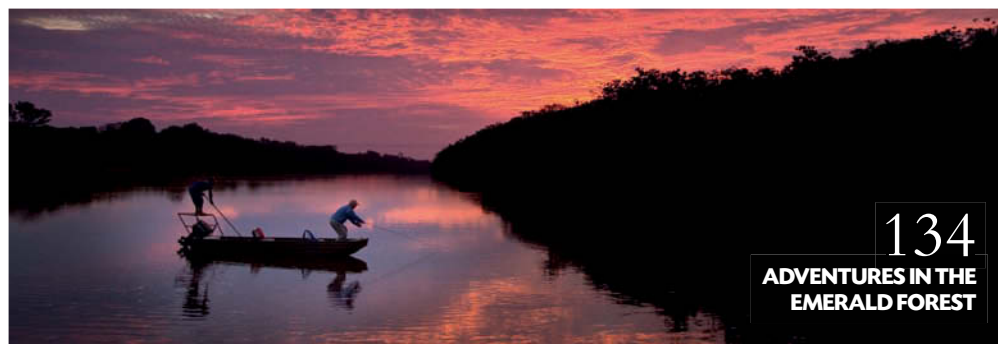
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Without man's best friend, shooting is just not quite the same

CONTRIBUTORS



**DAVE CARRIE,
PAGE 16**

“The shooting was thrilling, presenting every shot in the book, but this was just the start, a warm-up so to speak. The real stuff was about to erupt from a peak on top of the cliff...”



**ROBIN HURT,
PAGE 28**

“Perhaps the closest call I had was when my client and friend Sam Winston shot a hippo stone-dead with a perfect brain shot, just as I was about to be chomped!”



**DAVID S. D. JONES,
PAGE 52**

“... she travelled to Scotland annually in pursuit of deer, and between 1918 and 1937 killed a total of 698 stags on Harris alone.”



**SIMON BARR,
PAGE 54**

“With the skidoo unloaded, we started our long hike into the tundra in search of these magnificent prehistoric-looking animals.”



**HANS VERMAAK,
PAGE 68**

“I could hear footsteps in the muddy ground, a squelching sound that grew louder and louder. I was willing daylight to arrive – this wasn’t part of the plan...”



**SIMON WARD,
PAGE 80**

“The fact is, you were defeated by that bird before you even mounted your gun. And the root cause, you may be surprised to learn, almost certainly wasn’t poor technique, but poor preparation.”



**LORD JAMES PERCY,
PAGE 90**

“The grey clouds part and a pearlescent light shines as a huge hand reaches down and a finger beckons. The Big Man tells you that you have been chosen...”



**TIM FURBANK,
PAGE 100**

“Focus is always on the shoot returns, however, have you ever asked yourself what happens to the remaining birds left in February?”



**COLIN MCGURRAN,
PAGE 122**

“I withdrew my last £200 and bought a labrador puppy. I was on the cusp of losing everything and I knew that the one thing the bank wouldn’t take from me was a dog.”



**BEN RANDALL,
PAGE 148**

“Months of training and thousands of miles of travel across the country to qualify was all over. Now was the time to put it all on show...”



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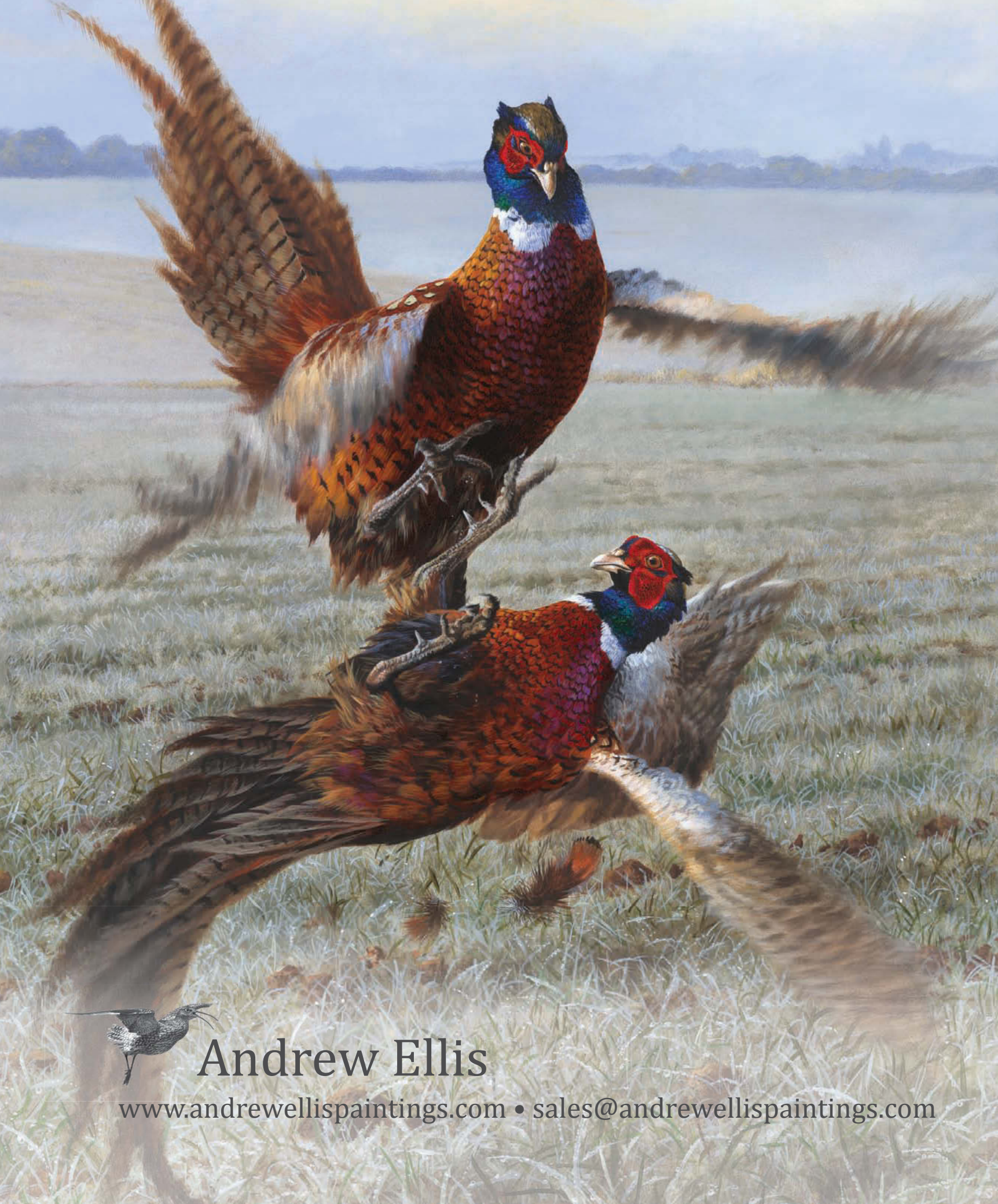
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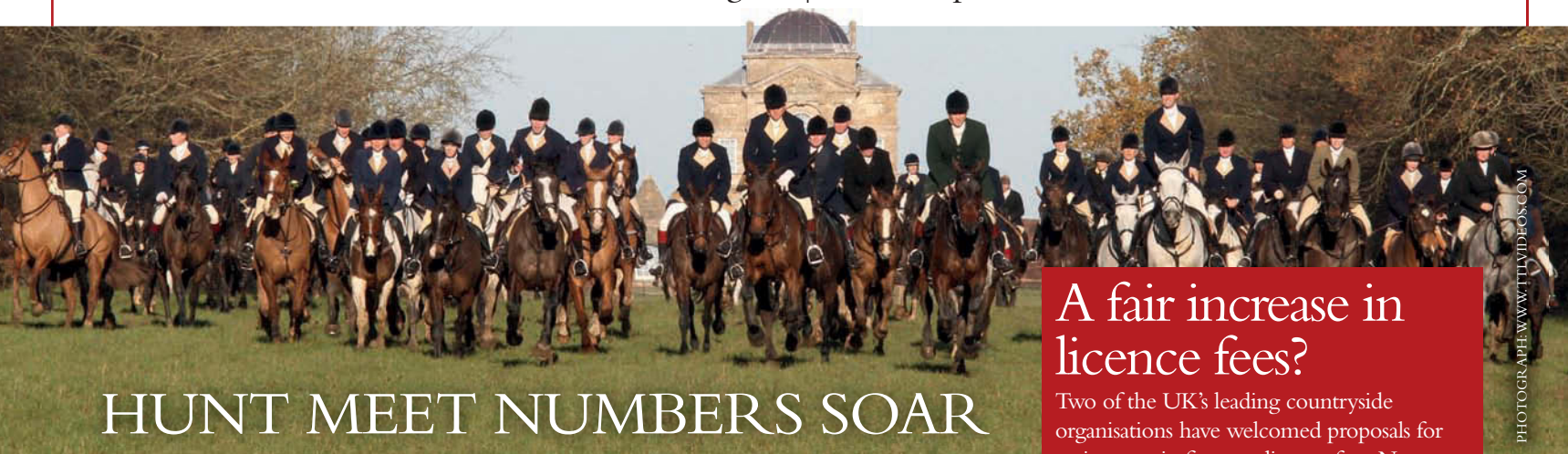
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February

THE REVIEW

March

News, shoots, art and guns | a market place overview



HUNT MEET NUMBERS SOAR

The end of 2014 saw hunts from across the country report huge followings at their Boxing Day meets.

Spokesperson for the Beaufort hunt, Jo Aldridge, said: "The Boxing Day meet at the Beaufort is always well supported, often with crowds of supporters approaching 5,000, but

this year's crowds amazed us all. We must have had in excess of 7,000 supporters on foot and 208 on horses – the biggest ever seen by many. It is 10 years since the ban and there is an election brewing, people are defiant and determined to see a change in this ridiculous law."

A fair increase in licence fees?

Two of the UK's leading countryside organisations have welcomed proposals for an increase in firearms licence fees. New guidelines from the Home Office working group, which included the police and other stakeholders from the shooting industry, have taken into account the police move to e-commerce for firearms licensing.

Countryside Alliance director of campaigns Tim Bonner, said: "The proposed increase in firearms licence fees is fair and proportionate bearing in mind the proposed move to an online system and that it has been 13 years since the last increase in fees."

The proposals entail an increase in the fee for the grant of a shotgun certificate from £50 to £79.50, a shotgun renewal would rise to £49, the grant of a firearm certificate would rise to £88 and renewal of firearms certificates would go up to £62. Variations on firearms certificates are proposed to be reduced to £20.

BASC have since written to the shadow chancellor Ed Balls to clarify the proposed pricing structure. Outlining the rigorous review of licensing fees and police costs, which has been undertaken by the Home Office working group, it was found that the full cost of recovery for firearms licensing under e-commerce would be £79.50, rather than the unverified figure of £196, claimed two years ago, on which Labour appears to have based its recent figures.

The proposals to increase the fee to full cost recovery under e-commerce have already been put out to public consultation. The online survey is now closed.

Double Gold at 2014 Purdey Awards

The Purdey Awards, held at Audley House in Mayfair, once again highlighted the outstanding conservation efforts made by shoots across the country.

The Purdey Shield and Gold Awards were presented to joint winners, Neil Brown, headkeeper at the 5,000-acre Allargue Estate in Aberdeenshire, and livestock farmer George Eaton, who owns the 150-acre Rectory Farm in Buckinghamshire. Both were presented with the coveted Purdey Awards Shield and a cheque for £4,000 by legendary chef Albert Roux OBE, after receiving identical total marks from the judges.

Bronze Awards were presented to Kevin Bowes of the Saham Hall Shoot in Norfolk and Gerald Needham, owner of the Coleby Shoot in Lincolnshire, each receiving a cheque for £2,000.

From last August, the Purdey Awards judges travelled the length and breadth of the country visiting shortlisted entries in order to meet entrants and assess their objectives, the quality of their conservation work and overall results.

The winners were announced in Purdey's historic Long Room by the Marquess of Douro, chairman of the judging panel.

The 2015 awards will be open for entries from Feb 16 until May 11, and are open to any size or type of shoot within the UK. Most importantly, entrants should be able to demonstrate to the judges how their work has improved their shoot and its biodiversity, and how this has also benefited other species of bird and wildlife.

www.purdey.com/shooting-life/purdey-awards



From left: Richard Purdey, joint Gold Award-winner George Eaton, Albert Roux OBE & Lord Douro

THE REVIEW



SALMON RESEARCH

Nearly 9,000 wild Atlantic salmon parr were recently caught on the River Frome in Dorset as part of a unique research project run by scientists from the GWCT.

Each of the fish were individually tagged with tiny microchips that enable the scientists to monitor them throughout their life-cycle, from when they leave the river in spring as smolts to when they return as adults to spawn, up to four years later.

In their most recent efforts, however, researchers found it hard to capture a sufficient number of young salmon to tag.

The GWCT's project team have been electronically tagging and monitoring fish in the river since 2005 and most years they anticipate catching more than 10,000 fish.

This long-standing research is already identifying some surprising results on salmon migration strategies.

www.gwct.org.uk/fishing/research/salmon

A new champion

Rheastmoor Fizzy, a three-year-old springer bitch and her owner Jon Bailey have won the prestigious Kennel Club English Springer Spaniel Championship at the Thirlestane Estate, Lauder, Scotland.

Ian Openshaw's Int FTCh Hollydrive Theo took second while Ian English's FTCh Helmsway Hope was third and Ben Watkins' FTCh Simonside Doris of Laysan was fourth.

See page 148 for Ben Randall's full report on the 2014/15 IGL Retriever Championship.

Jon Bailey with Rheastmoor Fizzy



BASC launches campaign to highlight the Value of Shooting to politicians

A campaign to ensure that MPs and general election candidates recognise the value of shooting has been launched by BASC.

The Value of Shooting report is based on the latest independent research which shows and quantifies shooting's many economical, social and environmental benefits.

Key facts from the research have been published in an easy-to-understand infographic, which has been sent to MPs. BASC's dedicated general election campaign website allows people to contact their local candidates and to send the Value of Shooting infographic to them.



THE VALUE OF SHOOTING



EVE APPEAL SHOOT

The Eve Appeal's 5th Annual Charity Shoot will once again take place on the West Wycombe Estate in Buckinghamshire, on May 28.

After a light breakfast, teams of four will shoot a variety of simulated game targets across four drives on the estate before enjoying a three-course lunch at West Wycombe House, hosted by Sir Edward Dashwood.

Research funded by The Eve Appeal is dedicated to halving the number of deaths from gynaecological cancers.

To enter a team or for more information, visit www.eveappeal.org.uk/shoot

FOUR SHOTS, ONE DAY

In early December, eight Guns enjoyed a day's shooting taking in four drives on four different shoots. The result of a successful bid for an auction lot at the last East Yorkshire annual GWCT Ball, the lucky team shot on Lord Manton's Houghton Estate, Christian Carver's Hotham Estate, Chris Taylor's Drewton Estate, and the Southwold shoot.



The lucky eight Guns with the four shoot owners



A great day for young Guns

The annual Belvoir Fieldsports 12-20 Club Christmas Shoot was once again a roaring success. Held at Belvoir Castle, 20 youngsters were split into three teams, taking it in turns to spend two drives with the beaters, two with the pickers-up and two shooting in the line. The day in question was one of the windiest (if not the windiest!) of the year. But they coped brilliantly and thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

For further information about the Belvoir Fieldsports 12-20 Club, visit www.bfs12-20club.com



The salmon of a lifetime

The 2014 winner of the FishPal Malloch Trophy – for one of the largest salmon caught on fly and safely returned during the year in Scottish waters – is Wayne

Longstaff of Teesside for this fine spring fish caught on the River Tweed. Weighing 33lb with a length of 33", it was landed on May 5 on the Hendersyde beat.

A NEW MASTER

John Frederick Jackman was installed as the new (377th) Master of The Worshipful Company of Gunmakers, in November 2014. Among his many duties as master, John will also become ex officio, a trustee of the Gunmakers Company Charitable Trust (GCCT) in what will be an important year for the trust as it embarks on its new fundraising appeal.

PAIRS OF GUNS FOR EVERY POCKET

12 bore BOSS sle. C 1926.

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12 bore BERETTA EELL factory pair.

Single selective trigger. 29 1/2" barrels. 3" chambers. Teague multi chokes. 15 1/4" exceptionally well figured stocks including 3/4" leather covered pads. Game scene engraved and numbered 1 and 2 in gold. In Beretta double case. **£11,500**

12 bore BERETTA Silver Pigeon 3.

Single selective trigger. 30" barrels. 3" chambers. 1/4 & 1/2 choke. 14 5/8" well matched stocks. Consecutively numbered guns marked 1 and 11 in gold. In Beretta double case. **£5,000**

12 bore BERETTA Ultralight deluxe.

Single selective trigger. 28" barrels. 1/4 & 1/2 choke. 15 1/4" very well figured dark stocks inc. 3/4" black "Limbsaver" recoil pads. Numbered 1 and 2 in gold. In Beretta double case. **£5,000**

20 bore BERETTA Silver Pigeon factory pair.

Single selective trigger. 30" barrels. 2 3/4" chambers. 1/4 & 1/2 choke. 15" stocks. Numbered 1 and 2 in gold. In Beretta double case. **£5,000**

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THE REVIEW

Newsbites

SCHOOLS CHALLENGE TURNS 10

Now in its 10th anniversary year, the Schools Challenge, run in association with the Oxford Gun Company, will this year see the winning young Shot walk away with a £12,000 car. www.theschoolschallenge.co.uk

ASK ANDREW

WMS Firearms Training has launched 'Ask Andrew', a new information service designed to provide rifle shooters with reliable and accurate answers to rifle shooting related questions. Email your questions to askandrew@wmsfirearmstraining.com

NEW FISH LABELLING LAWS

New fish labelling laws will force retailers to display more specific information about the provenance of salmon and other fish. The EU Fish Labelling Regulations came into force across Europe on December 13, 2014 to coincide with the tightened rules.

RESEARCHING RIGBYS

London gunmaker John Rigby & Co. has announced a new historical research service that will enable Rigby owners to discover the provenance of their firearm including when it was made, who it was first sold to, what its action number and serial numbers are and, if available, information on its style and finish.



SAVE THE DATE

The Shotgun & Chelsea Bun Club will host the first ever National Ladies Shooting Day, on June 27. With a series of 'have a go' events across the country, the aim is to encourage more ladies into the sport and raise the profile of lady Guns. E. info@shotgunandchelseabunclub.co.uk

ART AND AUCTIONS

March 19: Holt's, Princess Louise House, Hammersmith, London

April 15: Gavin Gardiner, Sotheby's, London

April 30: Bonham's, Knightsbridge, London



PURDEY MAGNUM

Sold at Gavin Gardiner's sale on Dec 10, was this fine .338 magnum self-opening sidelock ejector rifle from J. Purdey & Sons, No. 22690. Built in 1925, with 25½" Whitworth steel chopper-lump barrels and ramp foresight, matted short raised rib with folding leaf sights and mounted with a Nickel Marburg telescopic sight in quick detachable claw mounts. The gun weighs 9lb and was sold in its maker's brassbound oak and leather case with Manton & Co. retailer's label for £26,950.

BROWN BEAUTIES

Also sold at Gavin Gardiner's Dec 10 sale and built in 2003 was this fine pair of David McKay Brown 'creative art' engraved single-trigger round action over-under ejector 12 bores, Nos. 7790/1. With 29" barrels, 2¾" chambers, approx ¼ choke borings, narrow file-cut ribs and rounded frames, they also sport gold-numbered top levers engraved with large Scottish scrollwork. The guns have 14¾" highly figured stocks with pistol grips, weigh 7lb 2oz, are nitro proof and were sold in their lightweight leather case for £57,575.



TWO OF A KIND

Sold in the Bonham's sale on Dec 3 was this fine pair of Kelly-engraved single-trigger self-opening sidelock ejector 12 bores by J. Purdey & Sons, Nos. 29271/2. The top levers, ribs and forend-tips are numbered '1' and '2' in gold, with non-selective single-triggers, best bold foliate-scroll engraving, cocking indicators, the maker's name in gold, highly figured stocks with leather-covered recoil pads and chopper-lump barrels, also engraved with the maker's name. Weighing 6lb 14oz, with 15" pulls (14¾" stocks), 27" barrels, approx. ¼ choke, 2¾" chambers, London nitro proof, and sold in their leather case with canvas cover for £79,300.



ART Portrait perfect

Coral Rose is a full-time, professional artist based in Yorkshire, who specialises in traditional pastel and acrylic pet portraits and wildlife art. From Gundogs to horses, these custom-sized paintings offer a perfect way of remembering your loyal companions in the field. www.coralroseart.com/commissions





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A new season beckons...
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DUKE OF WESTMINSTER'S PARTRIDGES SUDANESE SALT WATER

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SHOOT PROFILE

I had been invited to shoot at Mulgrave Castle, 'the seaside shoot' – also famous for its fish and chips, and smoked kippers. I'd heard a lot about Mulgrave, and the thought of being stood at the peg on the famous Footman's Leap, or the The Point – which, I'd been told by several shooting friends, was one of the most testing drives they had ever shot – stirred an excitement in me akin to that felt by an eight-year-old on Christmas morning.

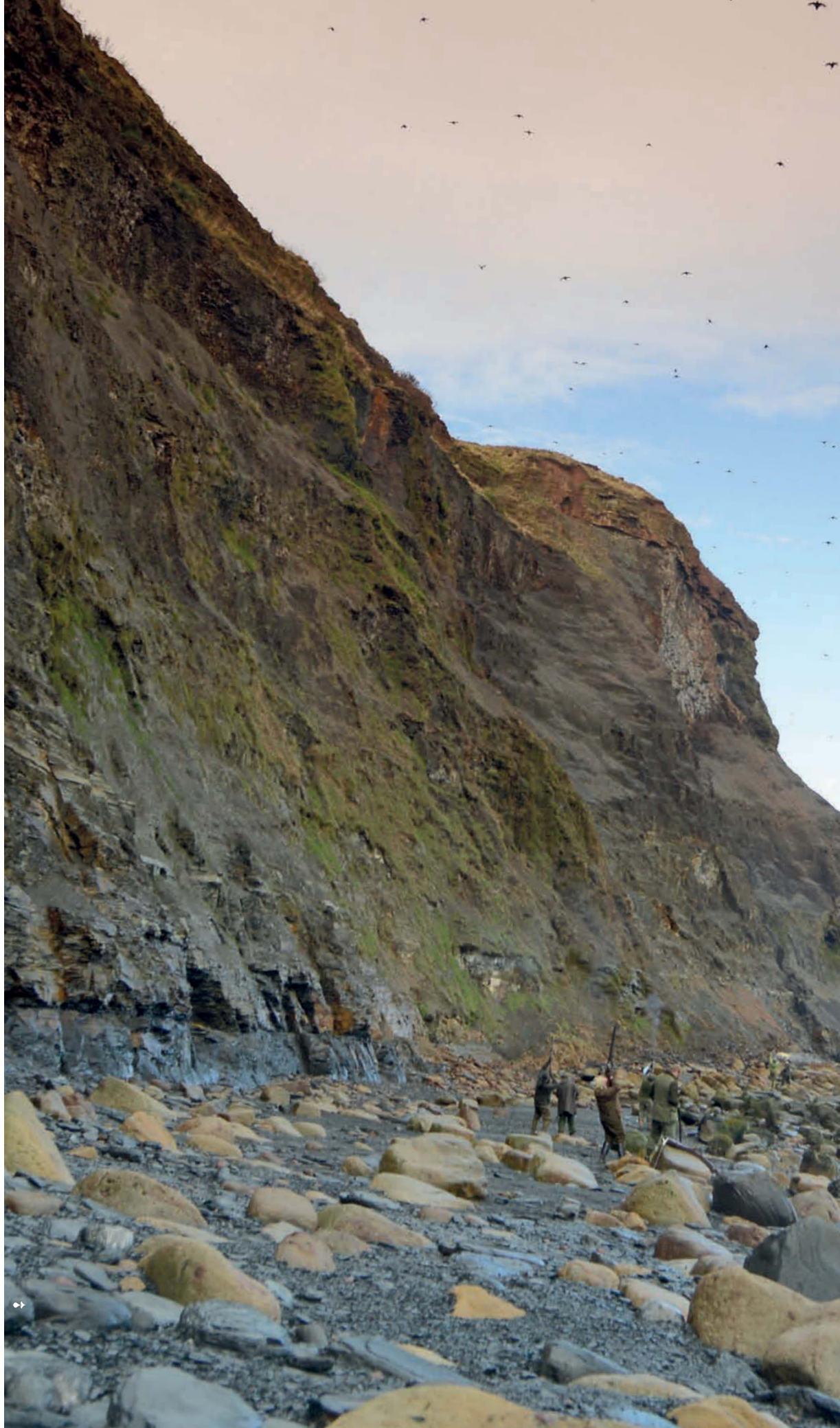
The estate is owned by the Marquis of Normanby, and the shooting is let to our host Julie Dedman, who, in my opinion, with the help of headkeeper Shaun Mintoff, has upgraded the shoot to be in the top five of North Yorkshire and, without doubt, the top 20 in the UK.

For a shoot to be worthy of a place on my personal top 20 list, it must tick the following boxes (listed in order of importance):

- Very testing birds for the top Shots, but with a mixture of birds for a range of abilities
- Ample stock on the ground to ensure the whole line get shooting on every drive
- An overall beauty that gives one pleasure just to be there
- Good food – elevenses, lunch etc.
- Good local hotels

Of course, these criteria will likely vary for other Guns, but one thing I can assure you of is that Mulgrave has all of the above, and in abundance.

After all the introductions, we clambered into the vehicles to go to the first drive, Footman's Leap. This is a very pretty drive, and a good walk – our team descending into the depths of a beautiful valley, with steeply-wooded banks and a stream that meanders its way along the valley bottom. I was placed over the stream at peg No. 4. At the morning briefing we had been told to ensure that we had some non-toxic cartridges with us for the first drive, and sure enough



Spectacular in every way: truly tall
partridges at The Point pour over the
cliff edge and towards the Guns pegged
on the beach below

A TRIP TO THE SEASIDE

Dave Carrie visits Mulgrave Castle in
North Yorkshire for a shoot day with a difference.

PHOTOGRAPHY: BOB ATKINS



my first shots of the day came only a few minutes after arriving at the peg, in the form of mallard, whistling over at great height and offering some tremendous shooting whilst the pheasant drive was developing. This was a nice twist to kick-start the drive, allowing one to gauge what was to come.

The pheasants were soon to follow as the beaters did a wonderful job trickling them over the line. I accounted for some stratospheric birds, although I missed quite a few also. Indeed, some of the birds were not for the faint-hearted and required good technique to bring them down.

By the end of the drive, everyone was swapping tall tales of the pheasants shot. The bag was 70 or so, including a few ducks which, given the number of shots fired, confirmed for me the sheer quality of the birds presented. A small drink and wonderful hors d'oeuvres followed, then onto the

next – the famous The Point drive.

We approached The Point along a narrow track that skirted the cliff tops, with amazing views out to sea, along the coast towards Sandsend, and further on to where Bram Stoker's Dracula landed – the old ruin atop the cliffs at Whitby. The scene was set – and believe me, they don't come much more atmospheric than this.

My loader Paul begged me to take only the one gun and just enough cartridges (he knew full well the possible consequences of the return journey fully laden). I greedily compromised with him, and agreed to carry a cartridge bag if he took the other and two guns. "You've got to have a spare haven't you," I told him. And you don't want the stigma of running out of shells either. He reluctantly agreed with a look in his eye that cursed me without the need to speak.

The whole party zig-zagged their way down the cliff, clinging

to roped stairways and near vertical steps – perhaps by 'testing', my friends had been describing more than just the shooting!

Alas, before long we reached the coal-black surface of the beach (this is where the Whitby Jet is found), and carefully made our way along the volcanic rock surface, picking our way through giant pebbles and large black rocks, en route to our pegs. Suffice to say, everyone made it. The ladies had opted to stay on the cliff tops, awaiting our return.

As we got settled on our pegs



and caught our breath, I noticed partridge flitting out a few yards from the cliff's edge, before turning back onto its top – part of the blanking-in, I suppose. The drive was soon underway, with the sea crashing noisily just 200m behind us. The early partridges made it over the line roughly 50 – 80m above us, with some also flying round the back of us as if to go out to sea and then arcing back towards land.

The shooting was thrilling, presenting every shot in the book, but this was just the start, a warm-up so to speak. The real stuff was about to erupt from a peak on top of the cliff. It was a sight to behold as the flurry of pheasant and partridges launched themselves off the tor above the cliff, heading strongly out to sea as if to invade another shore, and then swinging back along the line of the Guns, offering some spectacularly exciting and diverse sport.

There was a stunned silence when the horn sounded, followed soon after by gasps of delight and excited chatter about what we had just experienced.

My good friend and top game Shot Neil Ramsey was shaking his head in disbelief and remarked how most of the team had been severely whipped. I think there was also a touch of envy in his voice, as his son Lewis – just 16 years old – had pulled some fantastic birds down, and didn't appear phased by them at all. Oh to be young again!

The climb back to the cliff top seemed surprisingly tolerable, and after a short rest I reached out to Shaun, the headkeeper, and shook his hand vigorously. I noticed he was beaming as much as the rest of the team. That's the thing about keepers, they love to see everyone having a good time, but they love it even more if they can produce top-notch birds that sometimes beat the Guns. Shaun remarked: "It's all about balance; I try to produce birds that will suit all the teams, of varied abilities." I didn't know how he could surpass what we had seen so far.

Elevenes was next – and a nice surprise it was, too. We all gathered in the old ruin atop one of the wooded valleys, and the food on offer was superb – testament to Julie Dedman's skill at getting things right. Some would say it was over the top for elevenes, I would say it made the day extra special.

We had two American friends shooting with us on this day, John Oliver and Bob Arthur, both first-timers at Mulgrave who appeared quite taken aback by the scenery, quality of sport, and the proceedings as a whole.

Whilst we were having elevenes I mentioned to Julie how noticeably good the roads and tracks were to the drives, and especially the massive improvements to the stairway which leads down to the beach. ➡



“The whole party zig-zagged their way down the cliff, clinging to roped stairways and near vertical steps...”

The Guns making their way to their pegs on the beach at The Point

Most of the infrastructure has been recently built or laid, and much of the road and track network that criss-crosses the estate is, interestingly, a result of the hard work of Adrian Catlow, who stood in the line as a fellow Gun on this particular day.

After elevenses, the rain appeared and gradually got heavier. On the third drive, Rock Head, we stood facing a hanging wood affixed to a cliff face. Here, two members of the team – myself and Julie – were back-gunning, placed down at the very bottom of the cliff bank alongside a stream that, by now, had turned into a brackish torrent.

Most of the birds crossed in front, very high and fast, with a smaller number coming across for the classic high driven shot. A little gentler than the previous two drives, Rock Head gave most of the team at the front a chance to regain some credibility.

Lunch was enjoyed in a marquee-type arrangement in the wood. I knew that if elevenses was anything to go by then lunch would be extra special. And I was right – the menu could have been from a top-class London restaurant. It was all cooked on-site in front of the guests and eaten with relish and appreciation. Fresh Whitby fish and chips were also on offer from the local chippy van – delicious!



The plan was to have a fourth and final drive after lunch, but the weather had caught up with us, good and proper – i.e. it was monsoon-like! – and the decision was made not to shoot the last drive. I completely agreed with this and it proved to be unanimously popular as we all felt that we had had the best day possible, with

enough shooting in three drives to satisfy everyone.

Perhaps most encouraging is Julie Dedman's adavance that Mulgrave will only get better with time, and I have no reason to doubt this. The team she has in place is as good as it gets.

I always explain to Guns who don't think they have had their money's worth, that most keepers try their best to give you a good day, and won't last long in the business doing it any other way. Weather conditions are the most influential factors that govern whether a day is good or not – never the shoot or a gamekeeper that is worth his salt.

In this instance, and I believe I can speak for the whole team, a magnificent day was had by all – The Point and Footman's Leap, in particular, were quite special. As a shoot, Mulgrave has drives that can cater for both the



specialists and the average Shot. Weather permitting, I think they would be able to arrange a day to suit any team's specific needs – although I'd book early for next season, as I predict it will become a case of dead man's shoes in the not too distant future. The shooting can be arranged through Roxtons.

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Guns: Dave Carrie, Adrian Catlow, Julie Dedman, Bob Arther, John Oliver, Claire Jones, Lewis Ramsey, Neil Ramsey & Dean Hoyle

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SPORTING ARTIST

LARGER THAN LIFE

Some people are born into a life that eventually leads them to a particular profession, as if it was meant to be. Wildlife artist Mike Ghau is unquestionably one of those people, says Will Pocklington.



SPORTING ARTIST

It stands 12ft high at the shoulder, its head massive, trunk held loosely between two giant tusks protruding from weathered, wrinkled cheeks. Its ears fan out beside strong shoulders – a magnificent beast – but a certain serenity emanates from its bulky frame. The Tusker is a sight to behold. Perhaps more incredible, though, is that it once stood in a tithe barn in Gloucestershire, over 6,000 miles away from where it was first born as an idea brought to life by a dream-come-true commission for Kenyan-based wildlife artist Mike Ghau.

Michael Ghau was born and raised on a farm in southern Tanzania. One of six siblings, he describes how, from as early as he can recall, the whole farm was an endless playground of exploration – forests, rivers, dams, swamps and bush – where he would encounter all manner of wildlife. Tracking, hunting and fishing came naturally, and he would rarely be without his trusty catapult; a sterling education for an artist who now uses his ingrained interest in nature to great effect.

It would be unwise, though, to even attempt to draw parallels between Mike's upbringing and that of children from even the most rural parts of the UK. How many of us, after all, have shared a home with an elephant calf, a baboon and a brace of leopards?!

With so much at home to keep him entertained, it was to Mike's great displeasure when the local boarding school beckoned at the age of seven. His parents – only 40km away – even left his bed at home made-up, fully expecting their son's premature return. But two things kept him at school: the wildlife, and the art room.

"Every spare minute, a few friends



Working quickly with clay mixture

and I would escape out of bounds, looking for birds' nests, small animals, tadpoles and fish," he recalls. "And I can still smell the paint in the art room. I drew and painted every animal and bird I could think of, and entered my first painting competition at the age of eight. Soon after, I realised that it was something I really enjoyed."

Throughout the rest of his schooling, Mike continued to paint and draw and could usually be found in one of the local art clubs. Upon

leaving school, however, despite considering art college as a next step, he was encouraged by his parents, who were farmers themselves, to "study something useful", and so he decided to travel to the UK, where he studied for a degree in agriculture at Wye College – part of the University of London.

During this time,

Mike kept busy with the brush, and even managed to sell some of his creations whilst still at college – paintings of buffalo, herds of elephants, cheetah, kudu, zebra. "This not only kept me in beer money," he says, "but made me

"They fall asleep to the sound of hyaena, jackal, occasionally leopard, and wake to the call of fish eagles, guinea fowl and doves."

realise that one could probably make a living out of being a wildlife artist!"

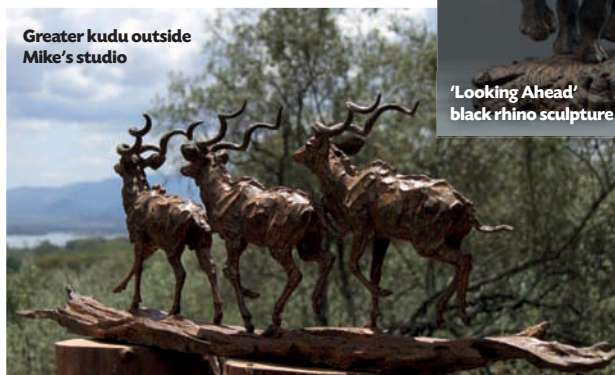
His first job, post graduation, was at a plant breeding firm in Norfolk, where he was charged with counting the ventral crease hairs on thousands of barley grains. "I smoked in those days, and so started with a pile of barley on one side of the microscope and a pack of cigarettes on the other," he remembers. "By the end of the day, these had swapped places, the cigarettes reduced to a pile of ash."

After a year of ventral crease hairs and a significant contribution to the UK tobacco industry, Mike had had enough, and announced that he was going home to be a wildlife artist.

His parents, though very pleased to see him, were shocked to say the least and soon steered Mike in the direction of a vacancy at a tea plantation close to the farm. "The only reason I took the job was because the manager's house



'Looking Ahead' black rhino sculpture



Greater kudu outside Mike's studio



'Lion and Lioness' oil painting on canvas



'Greater Kudu Bulls' oil painting on canvas

was a piece of paradise," he laughs, as he describes the first time he set eyes upon the old house, surrounded by lakes, gardens and thick forest. He took the job on the condition that a studio was built for him, and they duly agreed. He met his wife, Debbie, two years later, and together they stayed there for a further three years.

Although Tanzania was in the grips of socialism, the tea trade plodded on in old-fashioned colonial style. It was an interesting and fun time for Mike, but deep down a raw urge to paint full-time stirred. "After much deliberation, we decided to take the plunge," he says. "It was an uncertain gamble, but we agreed

that I would give it a five-year trial and if I hadn't made it by then, I would go back to tea planting and agriculture."

Mike Ghaui was 28 years old when he officially became a wildlife artist. Thirty-five years later, his enthusiasm is unwavering. "Still now, I am very happy to say that whenever the five-year trial runs out, I give it another five," he jokes. "There is so much to paint and sculpt out there and every day I see something that triggers another idea."

Mike and Debbie now live on the northern shores of Lake Naivasha in Kenya, their family's base for the past 30 years, where they typically spend half of their time. Here, they are surrounded by wildlife – buffalo, hippo, eland, zebra, impala and dikdik, to name but a few. They fall asleep to the sound of hyaena, jackal, occasionally leopard, and wake to the call of fish eagles, guinea fowl and doves. "These are the sounds of Africa. When you can hear these, you know you are in a good place," Mike assures me.

For the remainder of their year, Mike and Debbie are likely to be found in the wilds of Tanzania, usually on the banks of the Ruaha – a place Mike has frequented since 1961, when the whole family first went down there in a lorry. "It is a true wilderness, and I only have to think about it to get excited," he exclaims. "I can almost smell the wood smoke from our campfire and hear the sounds of the night."

As an artist, Mike is impressively versatile. His

paintings are oil on linen canvases, ranging from loose, sepia sketches to more detailed finished works, whilst his sculptures are modelled in various mixtures of clay – cast in bronze and sterling silver at Pangolin Editions Foundry in Gloucestershire. Among his greatest influences as an artist, he acknowledges Terence Cuneo, Wilhelm Kuhnert, Rembrandt Bugatti and, in the early days, David Shepherd. His specialism, not surprisingly, lies in the wildlife of East Africa, and his work has found its way into private collections the world over.

Mike first experimented with sculpture back in 1996, inspired by a photograph of family friend Rungwe Kingdon standing beside a life-sized bronze elephant. "Rungwe Kingdon and his wife Claude Koenig own Pangolin Editions, one of the leading bronze casting foundries in the world," says Mike. "I asked Rungwe if they would be able to cast my work and, fortunately, the answer was positive. The only problem being that I had never made a sculpture before!"

Mike's sculpting debut came in the shape of buffalo, elephants, greater kudu and warthogs, supplementing his diverse portfolio of paintings. Ever since, he has worked in both mediums, often on the same subject at the same time.

In 2008, a client in the U.S commissioned sculptures of three larger than life-size lions, a project that gripped Mike like no other previously. From this, the seed was sown for what is, arguably, Mike's career-defining piece: The Great Ruaha Tusker. ➡

THE ARTIST'S FOOTPRINT

Mike's work has been represented in New York by Sportsman's Edge and King Gallery since 1983, and more recently in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in the naturalism department of Gerald Peters Gallery. He has also participated in a number of the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum's annual shows and has work in their permanent collection, has showed paintings at the Tryon and Moorland Gallery in London, and at the Everard Read Gallery in Johannesburg. The Great Tusker is now kept on a private ranch in Texas, U.S.A. Mike would like to see the Artist's Copy of this sculpture placed in a city, where it would raise awareness of the plight of this magnificent species.

SPORTING ARTIST

THE GREAT TUSKER

In 1971, a huge bull elephant, with mammoth tusks, was poached from the Ruaha National Park in southern Tanzania. The tusks of the fallen beast, since confiscated by the Game Department, are the third largest on record and weigh over 200lb a side. They are still on display in the ivory rooms of Dar-es-Salaam, today.

Several visits to see the tusks first-hand, and relayed descriptions of the beast by senior game warden Eric Balson, who had seen the magnificent animal on several occasions, fuelled the fire in Mike's imagination. He dreamed of sculpting a big bull elephant.

In 2010, the dream was realised, and Mike was commissioned to sculpt a life-size bull elephant. He immediately set to work. Over the years, he had painted numerous canvases of the legendary bull in its Ruaha habitat and, along with yet more painted canvases, sepia sketches and sculpture maquettes, these provided the root of the final chosen maquette – the model that would be up-scaled into a larger than life tusker.

Work on the full-sized version commenced in May 2011 at Pangolin Editions – the enlarged



Mike Ghau with his two sons, Ed (left) and Barns standing with the completed sculpture at the clay stage

model made out of polystyrene, with a steel armature framework inside. From this, Mike was able to sculpt back a large part of the detail he required, before applying many coats of terracotta mixed with sand and adding further detail in clay, to a final finish.

The next step was down to the team at the foundry, who arrived at the tithe barn one sunny morning in October 2011. The decision had been made not to adopt the usual process of rubber moulding for the lost wax casting method, as this would involve the use of too many sections, causing distortion when welding

the cast sections together again. Instead, the sand moulding method of bronze casting, which allows bigger sections to be used in the casting process, was employed. When using this method, each section is imprinted in sand to get the negative required for a bronze positive.

But an alternative approach did little to stem Mike's utter shock at seeing his huge clay sculpture noisily cut up into 19 different pieces. "The old barn looked like a poacher's den," he exclaims. "The destructive nature of the experience put me into reverse gear for a few days!"

Once all the sections were cast in bronze, the sculpture began to take shape again. By the time it was fully assembled, with a stainless steel armature welded together inside its colossal frame for added support, the total weight of the sculpture amounted to six tons.

All that remained was the patination – a process whereby a mixture of heat and chemicals were used to create the warm soil colours that so often disguise elephant skin – really bringing the old bull to life.

Several weeks later, and the swallows that had spent the summer in the beams and rafters of the old tithe barn – witnessing so much of the giant sculpture's making – sat atop its roof, preparing for a momentous migration back to the lands of the bronze beast's namesake. Meanwhile, the dream of Mike Ghau had finally been realised. The Great Tusker was complete, strapped to a low-loader lorry and winding its way through the Gloucestershire landscape, on a journey all of its own. Finally destined for its new home...

www.mag-wildlife-art.com

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“With a stainless steel armature welded together inside its colossal frame for added support, the total weight of the sculpture amounted to six tons.”

Work in progress
in the foundry

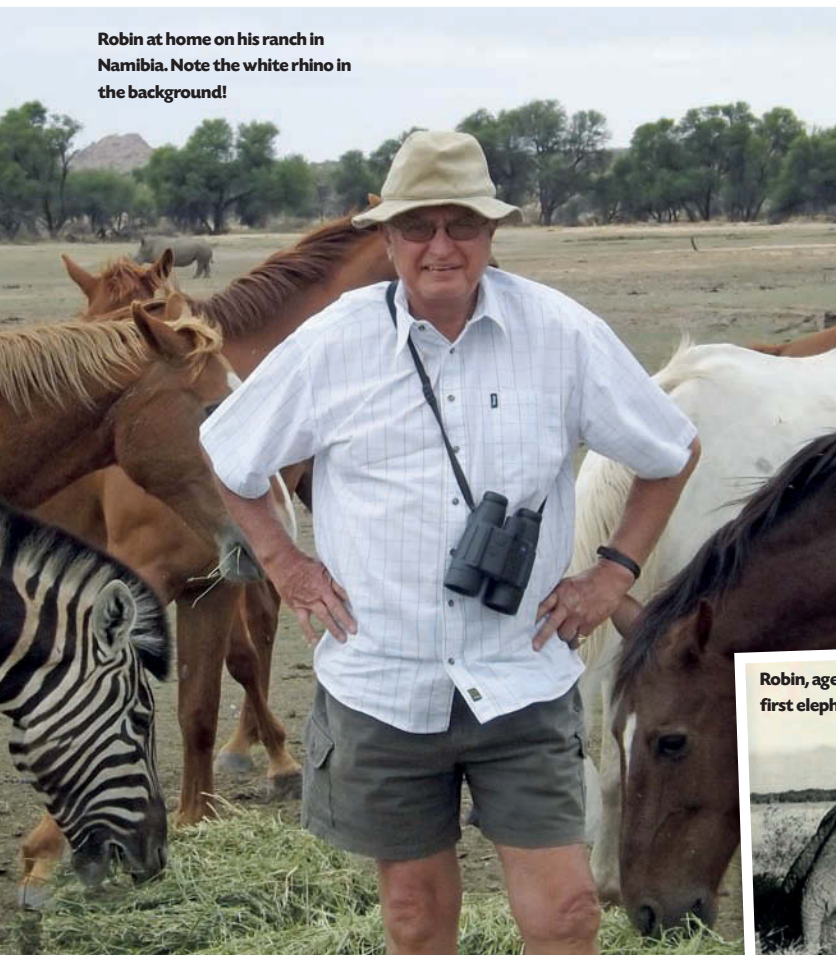
MY HUNTING DAY

with

Robin Hurt

A living legend of the safari world, Robin Hurt has been a Professional Hunter since the age of 18 and has spent the past 52 years conducting safaris in East, Central and Southern Africa.

Robin at home on his ranch in Namibia. Note the white rhino in the background!



Which countries have you hunted in?

As a licensed professional hunter (PH), I have hunted in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, Botswana, the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), Central African Republic, Sudan and Namibia. I have also safaried with my clients with other outfitters in Ethiopia and South Africa, and I have accompanied clients on bird shoots in England, Scotland, Spain and the Czech Republic. I have hunted for my own pleasure in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Austria, Yugoslavia, USA and Canada.

How did you come to be a PH?

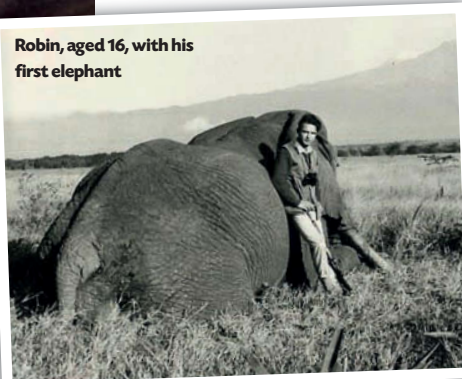
I grew up on our ranch on the shores of Lake Naivasha in Kenya's Great Rift Valley where my father, Lt Col Roger Hurt DSO, was a Kenya game warden, so I grew up with a love of wildlife and wild places, and hunting has been in my blood from a very young age. My

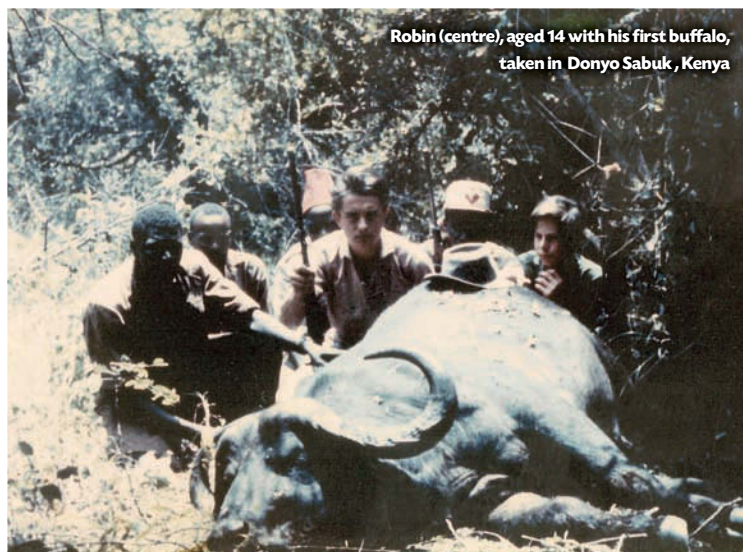
father was the biggest influence on me in my early years as a hunter and instilled in me a strict code of ethics, a sense of fair play and a love and respect for wildlife. I was a wild boy and liked to roam the hills on our land, rifle in hand. I hunted daily with my Maasai friend, Tinea. Our ranch was a magnet for wildlife with lots of plains game, numerous buffalo, plentiful leopard, the odd lion, and hippo in the lake. This was where I forged most of my early hunting skills.

Andrew Holmberg was another mentor who would often take me on safari during school holidays where I would help where I could. I shot my first elephant at the age of 16 with Andrew – a 96 x 96-pounder! My mother Daphne was most tolerant of my hunting obsession, and so I more or less had a free reign.

My early hunting for dangerous game was mostly in the company and guidance of my father's game scouts and, in particular, Sergeant Ndaga, an ace hunter of the Wakamba tribe. I left school at the age of 17 in 1962, and went straight into my first job on Nancy Miller's vast land holdings at Naivasha. My job, sanctioned by veteran senior game warden Lynn Temple-Boreham, was problem animal control; mainly buffalo

Robin, aged 16, with his first elephant





Robin (centre), aged 14 with his first buffalo, taken in Donyo Sabuk, Kenya

“I was an apprentice with the finest hunting company in Kenya at that time, Ker and Downey Safaris.”

and hippo. Shortly afterwards, in recognition of the work I had carried out, I was made an honorary game warden, a huge honour for a young man.

My actual professional hunting career started shortly thereafter, under the mentorship of John Cook, a PH of the old school. I was an apprentice with the finest hunting company in Kenya at that time, Ker and Downey Safaris. Fortune gave me a huge step up the ladder as, in 1963, Tanganyika Wildlife Development Corporation, a government parastatal, was looking for young PHs. I understudied Donald Rundgren, (son of the famous hunter, Eric) for several months in the Selous Game Reserve, and my full PH licenses in both Kenya and Tanzania were granted shortly thereafter, when I was still only 18 years old. We had to grow up quickly in those days!

And did you have any hunting idols?

I was an avid reader of all of Frederick Courtney Selous' books as well as those by Karamojo

Bell, Gordon Cummings and John Guille Millais. And I studied Rowland Ward's book of records, too. The hunters I looked up to and admired were often friends of my father's, such as Eric Rundgren, Bill Ryan, Fred Bartlett, John Sutton, Tony Archer, John Cook, John Lawrence and Andrew Holmberg – all, in their own ways, outstanding hunters and gentlemen.

If you could go on one last safari, where would you go?

As most of my old stomping grounds such as Zaire and Sudan are now closed to hunting or have been poached to death, it would have to be somewhere that is still open to hunting. It would have to be somewhere I could hear lions roar each night, territory where big tusked elephant and rhino roam, and where buffalo with heavily bossed horns are common! Not to forget my favourite dangerous animal, the leopard. Such places existed once and I was privileged to experience them during my half-century as a PH. Sadly, such game fields are now a thing of the past. But that doesn't mean one can't dream. As a nameless Chinese philosopher once said, he who can live in the past as well as the present, lives doubly. But when reality kicks in, I am more than content here in Namibia, one of Africa's finest game countries.

What is your favourite quarry?

Without a doubt my favourite dangerous animal is the African leopard. Stealthy, cunning, secretive and a hugely dangerous

antagonist when wounded, there are few, if any, animals that come close to having such a reputation. The Cape buffalo comes a very close second, being extremely dangerous as well. As plains game goes, it is the 'grey ghost', the greater kudu that gets my vote.

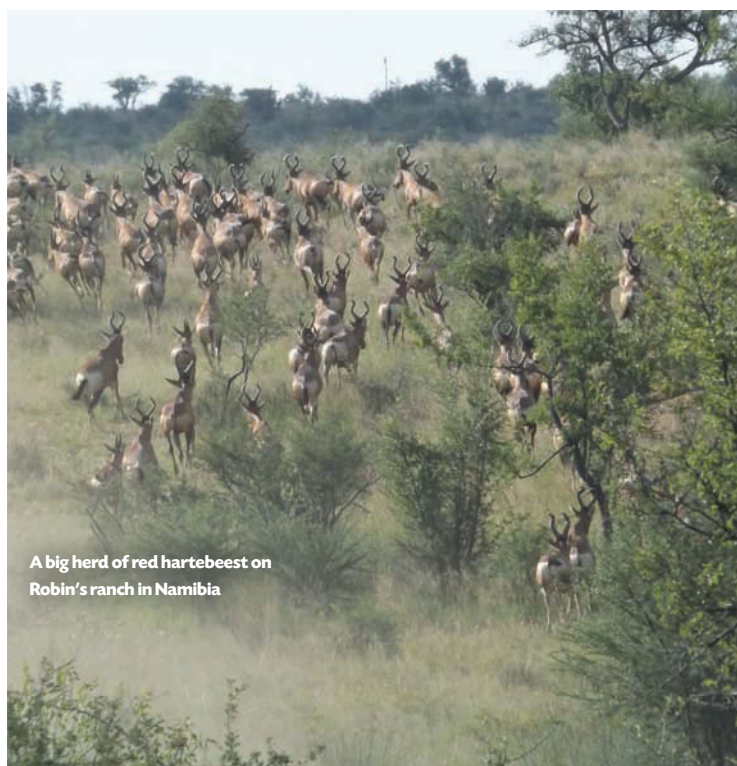
I also love wing shooting, especially driven grouse, pheasant and partridge in the UK. Without a doubt the finest gamebird in the world – in my opinion – is the red grouse.

And the most challenging?

Without a doubt, the Kenyan or eastern bongo. This animal can no longer be hunted due to the Kenyan hunting ban which was enforced in 1977. The eastern bongo live in the most inhospitable high altitude bamboo rain forests, in dense cover at altitudes of over 8,000ft. And they're an animal of extreme cunning with acute hearing and sense of smell, and incredible eyesight. In my opinion, when Kenya allowed bongo hunting many moons ago, it was the most difficult animal in the world to hunt – bar none. Bongo are easily bayed-up by dogs and, as such, are highly vulnerable to poachers. So, even if Kenya were to allow safari hunting again, I would be opposed to the licensing of bongo, as their numbers have been devastated through illegal poaching.

Which rifle calibres do you favour?

The best all-round calibre that can be used on any animal in Africa, with suitable ammunition, is any one of the .416 calibres. Here in Namibia, the perfect plains game rifle would be either the .300 or .338 Win Mag. Both offer accurate ballistics suitable for shots of up to 300 yards. I would not recommend taking shots at longer distances,



A big herd of red hartebeest on Robin's ranch in Namibia

PROFILE

except in extreme conditions, such as on a wounded animal.

My favourite dangerous game rifles have both been doubles in .470 and .500 Nitro Express made by William Evans in London. For my magazine rifle, my preference was for the Westley Richards .425. Indeed, most people can't shoot open-sighted double rifles well and I find they get on with a scope-sighted magazine rifle far better. But there are exceptions, for example Sheikh Sultan Al Thani from Qatar and Marshall Field and the late Sam Winston from the US, all of whom are/were as deadly with double rifles as the very best PHs.

And shotguns?

I have a pair of Westley Richards

sidelock 12 bores and a 28 bore drop lock, also built by Westley Richards. My preference now is to shoot with the 28 bore, which I absolutely love!

Who is the best Shot you have ever come across?

The best rifle Shot I have ever seen was Katherine Eaton, a Canadian girl who hunted a dozen animals with 13 shots! The best shotgun Shot, by far, that I have ever shot with was David Ker of London.

Who do you regard as the greatest PHs of your generation?

The very best living PHs, in my opinion are, in no particular order Mike Bartlett, Simon Evans, Johan Calitz, Franz Coupe, Dirk de Bod, Jeff Rann, Josh Perrot, Peter Holbrow, John Sharp, Craig Butler, Danny McCallum, Raoul Ramoni, Coenraad Vermaak, Garry Kelly, Clive Eaton, Jason Roussos and, without being too prejudiced, my two sons, Derek and Roger Hurt.

And the best trackers you have ever worked with?

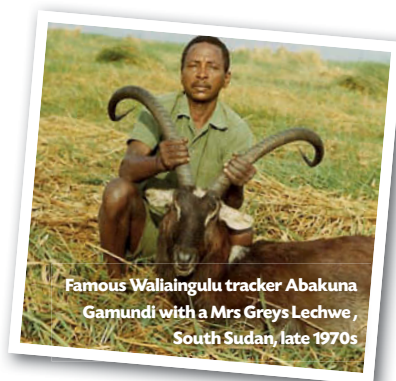
The best elephant trackers I have hunted with were the Guyu brothers – Diwani, Chancalo and Abajila – and Abakuka Gamundi. They all hail from the Kenyan Walingulu tribe. What these fine men didn't know about elephant wasn't worth knowing. The most skilled bongo trackers were also Kenyans from the Nandi tribe. Laboso Arap Sura and Joseph Sitiene were both particularly skilled trackers. The finest lion tracker I used in Botswana was a San bushman aptly named

“What these fine men didn't know about elephant wasn't worth knowing.”

Stomach for obvious reasons – he would never lose spoor in the hot Kalahari sands and could track faster than I could walk!

You must have had one or two close-calls in your time?

I have had many! I was charged down and tossed by a buffalo and I was also mauled by a leopard.



Famous Walingulu tracker Abakuka Gamundi with a Mrs Greys Lechwe, South Sudan, late 1970s

My son Derek was also recently mauled by a leopard, so I believe we have the dubious reputation of being the only father and son duo to be members of this club! Perhaps the closest call I had, however, was when my client and friend Sam Winston shot a hippo stone dead with a perfect brain shot from his .500 William Evans double rifle, just as I was about to be chomped!

There are hundreds of hunting myths and misconceptions, but what, in your view, are the most common ones that you would love to dispel?

Leopard are not endangered – they are common throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. They are nocturnal by nature, so are rarely seen unless baited, which leads to the misconception that they are scarce when, in fact, they are the most common of the big cats by

far. Lion, on the other hand, have declined in numbers at an alarming rate over the past 50 years. This can be attributed to an unchecked human population which has encroached into the wilderness. More people = more cattle = less lion. Cattle herders hate lion and will kill them by any means, including poisoning. Another common misconception is that Africa is crawling (or slithering!) with snakes – they are not as common as one is led to believe.

If you could offer one piece of advice to someone thinking of going on their first safari, what would it be?

Always get a reference from a previous client of the PH or safari company you intend to book with. This will tell you a lot about your PH's integrity, his competence and character, and what his back-up plans might be in the event of something going wrong. Also find out about their deposit policy, camp staff, trackers, vehicles, equipment and hunting areas.

What do you regard as the biggest threat to African wildlife?

Human encroachment into the wilderness. Quite simply, less habitat = less wildlife. Poaching of rhino and elephant, fuelled by demand for illicit rhino horn and ivory in Asia, is also a major problem. Unless the black market is shut down, poaching will continue. The financial incentive to poach is a huge temptation for people living in the bush who have very modest or no income. In order to overcome the current poaching crisis, however, education and awareness needs to be transported to Asia. The problem is that in Far Eastern cultures, conservation of wild animals is not a priority. Targeting the end user is the only solution.



Robin (left) with a client and his huge Kenyan buffalo, taken in 1973

Robin's favourite plains game species, the greater kudu. This exceptional bull was taken on Robin's ranch in Namibia



Do you think that the viability of commercial hunting is secure?

Safari hunting is one of the best forms of wildlife and habitat conservation. Wild places need competitive forms of land use, so if people and governments are to be encouraged to set aside vast tracts of land for wildlife, local people must benefit from them. This is why community wildlife projects have sprung up in countries such as Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Tanzania. Kenya's closure of hunting in 1977 only served to take a legal presence out of the bush (safari hunters) and create a void which has subsequently been filled by illegal, indiscriminate poachers.

It will be interesting to see how the Botswana hunting ban enacted at the end of last year pans out. My guess is that legal hunting will be reopened out of necessity to appease local communities who have lost out heavily through the ban. The alternative is a return to poaching as a means of living. It is far better to have a legal hunting presence in the bush, which is in fact controlled management, rather than indiscriminate poachers. Legal hunters are, out of necessity, the best conservationists

– stewardship of wildlife is central to their way of life and business, whereas poachers are simply bent on extermination of wildlife for a quick financial return, with no care for wild animals at all.

With the current poaching epidemic raging throughout Africa, our Tanzania company, Robin Hurt Safaris (Tanzania) Ltd, run by my sons Derek and Roger, chooses not to hunt elephant in our concessions. We want to look after our big bulls which are prime breeders. We have not hunted elephant in these areas for more than a decade. We are not against other operators hunting elephant – the fact remains that the mere presence of legal hunters in a safari concession is a deterrent to poachers.

If you could get one message across to the world's media about wildlife conservation in Africa, what would it be?

Don't interfere in something you know very little about. Instead, encourage conservation through realism and not through misguided emotion. Work with African people and governments, not against them.

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OVER THE COUNTER

with
David Stapley

UK country manager for Browning and managing director of ISB Ltd, who have the sole agency for Browning, Miroku and Winchester in the UK and Ireland.

Do you come from a shooting/hunting background?

My father was a farmer and he used to shoot, but I didn't get into shooting myself until I became an agricultural student at the end of the 80s. This started off as a bit of rough shooting and vermin control around the farm, but I also represented the college shooting team. When I look back now, I do smile to myself as I really had no idea of what I was doing back then, but we did not disgrace ourselves and we had some fun, even with limited talent.

What is your favourite form of shooting?

My favourite form of shooting is game shooting, and although it is mainly driven pheasant at my syndicate shoot in Gloucestershire, I have been lucky enough to shoot on some lovely partridge days and even on the grouse moor which is always a treat. But some of my most enjoyable days have been pigeon shooting with friends. I think the company is the most important factor for a good day out with the gun.

How did your association with Browning, Miroku and Winchester come about?

I think it was a twist of fate! I had been working in central London in a sales and marketing role for about six and a half years and the commuting was killing me as I was sitting in traffic jams for five hours every day. I was desperate to get back working with a big brand in any outdoor sports industry, having previously enjoyed working for so many years in the golf trade. In 2008 I stumbled across a small advert with the title 'Leader in the outdoor sports industry'. The advert went on to describe how a leading brand was looking to recruit a new business owner to their UK territory. I did not know what the brand was at the time, but I had a feeling that this was going to be perfect for me and, following several rounds of interviews, I was delighted to be offered the role with Browning International, a brand that I was obviously very familiar with.

So now I own International Sports Brands Ltd (ISB), the exclusive sales agency for Browning, Winchester and Miroku for the UK and Ireland. We are very proud to represent some of the biggest brands in the shooting world. We are a dedicated and passionate team who are responsible for promoting the brands to a customer base of over 200 gun dealers throughout the country and direct to the consumer at various events throughout the year including the Shooting Show and CLA Game Fair. We also hold a number of demonstration days in conjunction with dealers so that people can come and try a selection of guns for themselves.

You are also country manager for Browning – what does that entail?

Yes, I wear two hats which can be a bit confusing looking from the outside. As well as owning ISB, I am also the 'country manager' for Browning International which is not an employed position, but I am entrusted to manage all of the commercial affairs of the brands in this country. The scope of the role is varied, with responsibility for nearly everything apart from warehousing, distribution, finance and after-sales which are still overseen by Browning HQ in Belgium.

What is your best-selling shotgun in the UK?

Our best selling shotgun in terms of volume is still our entry level B525 Sporter. I think that this is just the perfect all-rounder and if you

were going to own just one gun, this particular model would do most jobs extremely well. It is amazing to think that this entry level shotgun has hardly changed since the original B25 on which it is based, which was first created

by John Moses Browning back in 1925. And even more incredible to think that it is cheaper to buy now than it was when I first started with Browning in 2008! It really is a success story that just keeps going and going.

What percentage of your sales are to the game shooting market?

It is very hard to put an exact figure on it, as

“Learn your etiquette, respect the traditions, be safe and go and enjoy yourself.”



many people use what we would describe as a sporting gun for game shooting. But in terms of pure game gun sales, they would represent approximately 42 per cent of all our over-under shotgun volume.

Is there much demand for very top-end Brownings, and has that demand decreased/increased in recent years?

It is surprising in these times of austerity that there continues to be demand for our handmade 'Custom Shop' Brownings. Sales numbers have remained fairly constant over recent years but this has been due to our limitation in supply capacity rather than anything else, with a current lead time of around 24 months which can put all but the most devoted off! Our handmade range starts at £11,500 for a B2G and goes upwards from there depending on wood grade, engraving and embellishments.

Are you still noticing a trend towards smaller bore sizes for game shooting?

There has certainly been a noticeable movement in recent times towards smaller calibres with longer barrels, but if you look at the numbers, the 12 bore is still by far the biggest seller in the game gun sector. Personally, I have moved away from a 12 bore to a Heritage 20 bore for all but the highest pheasant shoots as I think that a 20 bore is perfect for most game shooting conditions, particularly in early season.



A pair of handmade Browning DSGs

Have you noticed any other trends in recent years?

I am pleased to say that I have been impressed with the number of new shooter initiatives recently, particularly the ones aimed at bringing on younger shooters. I have personally been a supporter of a number of programmes that attract new people into the sport (whether they be of school age, women or middle-aged males) and I am delighted that many head teachers are now realising the benefits of introducing shooting sports as part of the school curriculum. There are a number of high profile school competitions now attracting higher and higher numbers and producing some incredible talent.

If we are to survive and grow as an industry, we all need to nurture the new shooters of the future and help grow our numbers as a participation sport.

What are your views on the possibility of a lead shot ban?

I think it would be a sad day to see the outlawing of lead as nothing works better. There seems to be a political agenda from some organisations to push for a ban, irrespective of the scientific evidence being taken into account. I think it is our responsibility as shooters to use lead legally now before a ban is imposed on us by faceless bureaucrats who know nothing about our industry and care even less about it.

What advice would you offer to a new or aspiring game Shot?

Learn your etiquette, respect the traditions, be safe and go and enjoy yourself.

Is there a particular individual who you admire in the shooting industry?

Yes, I admire John Batley of the GTA (Gun Trade Association). He, and the team at the GTA, is dedicated to representing and protecting the shooting industry at so many levels. John has a vast knowledge of all aspects of the industry and his work continues out of the limelight but achieves so much (often the credit is claimed by others) for so many of us who are involved with shooting. Thank you, John.

If you could change one aspect of how country sports are conducted in the UK, what would it be?

For a shooting community in the UK of less than one million people, I would imagine that we would have a far bigger voice if all of the shooting organisations that report to represent us as shooters worked closer together or even formed one national organisation for shooting.

What shotgun do you personally shoot with?

I am lucky that I have a large number of shotguns in my demo gun fleet that I can call upon at a moment's notice, but I tend to stick with my three trusted guns: sporting clay shooting – B525 Prestige 12 bore; game shooting – Browning Heritage 20 bore; extreme pheasants – Miroku MK60 32" High Pheasant.

Cartridge of choice for pheasants?

Winchester Special Fibre or Winchester Super-Speed – fantastic!

Other interests aside from guns/shooting?

I used to be a reasonable golfer with a single figure handicap, but golf has all but disappeared from my life since a small boy appeared nearly two years ago!



Grumpy Old Gun

Shooting is a sociable pursuit, says Grumpy Old Gun, but unfortunately, the bucolic atmosphere is occasionally spoilt by you know who.

Now, I don't want to come across as a miserable old git, but I have another gripe. Unfortunately, we all know one or two inconsiderate Guns – Richard Head springs to mind; you've probably shot with him at some point as he gets around a fair bit.

Just as we're about to sit down for our shoot breakfast, Dick will invariably text to say he's running a tad late as he forgot he had an appointment at the dentist.

Having kept everyone waiting, he finally turns up without an apology and, just as we are about to order, gets up to answer his bloody phone. And to make matters worse, he seems oblivious to the fact that his ringtone has been banned in all public places since 2003 because it's so bloody annoying.

After 20 minutes, he returns to the table and complains that his breakfast is cold. "And to be honest, I would have chosen the smoked haddock and poached eggs," he mutters under his breath. In the 20 long years I've known him, he has never ordered anything but bacon and eggs on shoot mornings. He then barks at the waiter for another pot of coffee because, believe it or not, the one

that was brought to the table an hour ago is cold. "How hard is it to make a pot of coffee?" he asks, incredulously.

When we finally arrive at the shoot, Dick is nowhere to be seen. "I passed him in a farm gateway about a mile back, says one Gun, through gritted teeth. "He was on his phone." Dick does eventually turn up, just as we are leaving the yard for the first drive. "Ah, Dick, just in the nick of time – you've drawn peg five," says our shoot captain.

"Well that's quite a coincidence," says an annoyed Dick, "that's the fourth time I've had number five this season. No doubt I'll be out of the shooting again."

As we get to our pegs, no-one is surprised to discover that Dick's forgotten his cartridge bag in his car, also for the fourth time this season. He then asks if the keeper can just hold the beaters up for a few minutes while he runs back to his car. Realising that he's lost his car keys, Dick then ambles back to his peg, borrowing ammo from his neighbours en route. At last, the drive gets underway.

To be fair to Dick, he actually shot quite well. As I wonder over to congratulate him on an impressive hen he took with one of my cartridges, I notice that he is trying to kick his empty cases into the plough. You'd like to think he at

least had the decency to pick-up some of his own birds or tell a picker-up where they are. Like hell! He always makes a beeline straight for his vehicle at the end of the drive, leaving the rest of us to ensure that his birds are accounted for.

After a lengthy call to the RAC (his keys are in the boot of his car, along with his cartridges, the pork pies and sloe gin), Dick finally gets to his peg on the next drive, only to discover that it is already occupied by Graham. After

"Dick's response, although typical, made Charlie spout sloe gin out of both nostrils."

a lengthy debate, Dick begrudgingly stomps off up the line, mumbling something about the ludicrousness of moving up three rather than two.

He then belligerently shoots a number of very low birds. "There were bugger-all decent birds over me on that drive," he explains afterwards. "And I don't know why Graham didn't just let me shoot his peg – everyone knows he can't hit the high ones anyway."

When it comes to elevenses, Dick unapologetically explains that the pork pies and drinks basket are locked in his car. Luckily, David has always got an emergency supply for exactly this sort of disaster. When asked what he would like to drink, Dick doesn't hesitate: "A Sloegasm will do nicely," he

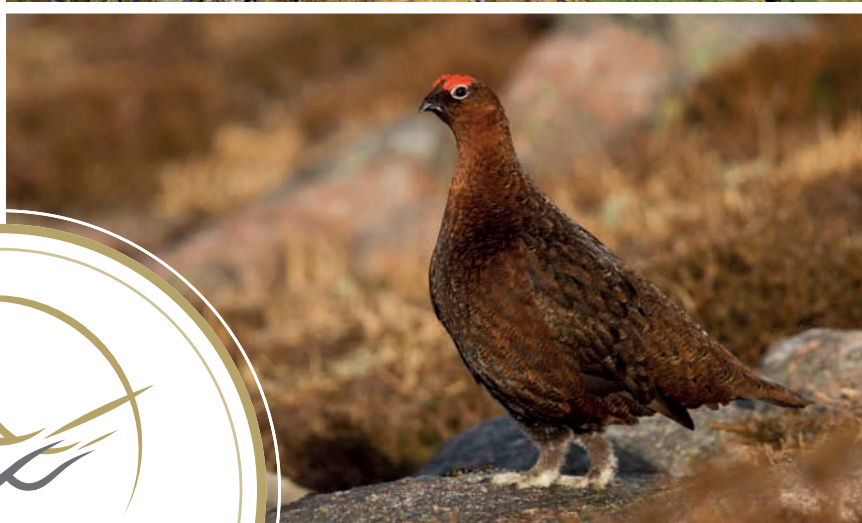
says. "Unfortunately, I don't have any bubbles," says David." Dick's response, although typical, made Charlie spout sloe gin out of both nostrils. "I wish you'd told me that before I locked my keys in my car – I have a spare bottle of Moët in the boot. Such a shame." Dick then turns down David's pork pie, saying he only likes the ones from Fortnum and Mason's.

The last drive sees Dick reunited with his cartridge bag, but it doesn't occur to him to replace the cartridges he blagged off the rest of us.

The bag is counted and the keeper brings round a brace of pheasants, no doubt hoping for a well-

deserved tip. At which point Dick is overheard saying that he thinks he's left his wallet at the dentist. But that doesn't stop him from asking the keeper to go back to the game cart to find that lovely looking melanistic cock bird that he shot on the second drive.

As David gets up to leave, he mentions that he's just going to thank the beaters. Unsurprisingly, Dick has something to say. "I don't know what you need to thank them for – they get paid, don't they? And besides, all they've done is go for a lovely walk in the countryside and tapped their stick a few times. You can hardly call that work." *Next issue, Grumpy Old Gun has something to say about inappropriate shooting attire.*



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PHOTOGRAPH: TWEED MEDIA

RED DEER STALKING

MEMORIES OF MULL

A poignant trip to the Inner Hebrides brings Nick Hammond up close and personal with the wildlife of Mull.

The breathtaking
Mull landscape



RED DEER STALKING

It's got wings like a barn door. That's the only bizarre way I can think of to describe this white-tailed sea eagle.

I'm on a deserted loch inlet and the sea is Caribbean clear and blue. The eagle above turns a great grey head in my direction and scythes through the wind.

I'm on a pilgrimage. I first came to Mull 10 or so years ago with my father, and we spent an unforgettable few days in this staggering wilderness; walking in incessant rain by day; snug in a seaside bothy by night; sustained by a warming casserole, wine and a log fire crackling sleepily in the grate.

He's since died, my dad, and I've long felt the urge to come back to see this stunning island again and reconnect with those memories.

I'm going to try and claim my first red stag. But first I'm tramping



alone along the northern coast in blustering, rain-splattered splendour.

I walk for six hours and don't see a single soul. I'm on the Glengorm Estate – the heart of which is the castle, standing tall and overlooking distant Coll and Tiree. If Disney did Scottish castles, they'd do Glengorm. It's got turrets and towers, great oaken doors, mop-fringed Highland 'coos' and a driveway several miles long. It has also got a whisky library to die for. Keep this bit to yourself; whisky is free for residents.

I decide to stay.

Tom and Marjorie Nelson and their family live here, looking after the spectacular castle as well as an estate which boasts a coffee shop, full time wildlife warden, self-catering cottages, a bakery in Tobermory and a farm.

Tom has secured the services of local stalker Norman MacPhail for my red stag stalk, and the forthcoming trip is now playing on my mind. On my walk across the estate, I find myself thinking about how things will go; visualising the stag, the hill, the moor. What will the weather do? Will I shoot straight? What if I come home empty-handed?



As I lie in bed, fortified with a glass or two of the water of life, I can hear the stags roar at each other, back and forth across the estate. With each wave that dies on the rocks below, the sea issues a stern 'shh,' but the animals take no notice. They have other things on their minds.

Morning comes late up here and 7am feels like 3am as I peer out into the blackness. The castle is cold and still.

I breakfast in silence, the only resident daft enough to be up and about. The wind has dropped significantly overnight and as the sky outside turns from black to purple, I try and do justice to a hearty Scottish breakfast.

Norman arrives an hour later in a chatter and crunch of Argo treads on gravel. There's a .270 with bipod sleeved in the back, along with a terrier called Thompy and a 13-year-old called Lee. He's Norman's nephew (Lee, not Thompy) and he has the traditional flinty, stoic, Scottish style. I get the impression he could shoot out a gnat's eye at a hundred paces if required. No pressure, then.

Glengorm's fine cattle are just that because of the lush pasture around the estate, which the deer have taken a liking to as well. The biggest, strongest and canniest of them make their way to high ground and grab themselves a harem. They then spend the rest of the rutting season defending it from intruders who are intent on a military coup.

I take deep lungfuls of crisp air and try to relax as we drive through the farm cottages and lowland pasture. Hooded crows cavort in the fast-brightening sky.

It's damp – this is Scotland, after all – but clear and quite beautiful. As the track ahead steadily rises, the horizon falls away to reveal



the foaming Atlantic Ocean.

"You're lucky," Norman tells me laconically. "It's not raining."

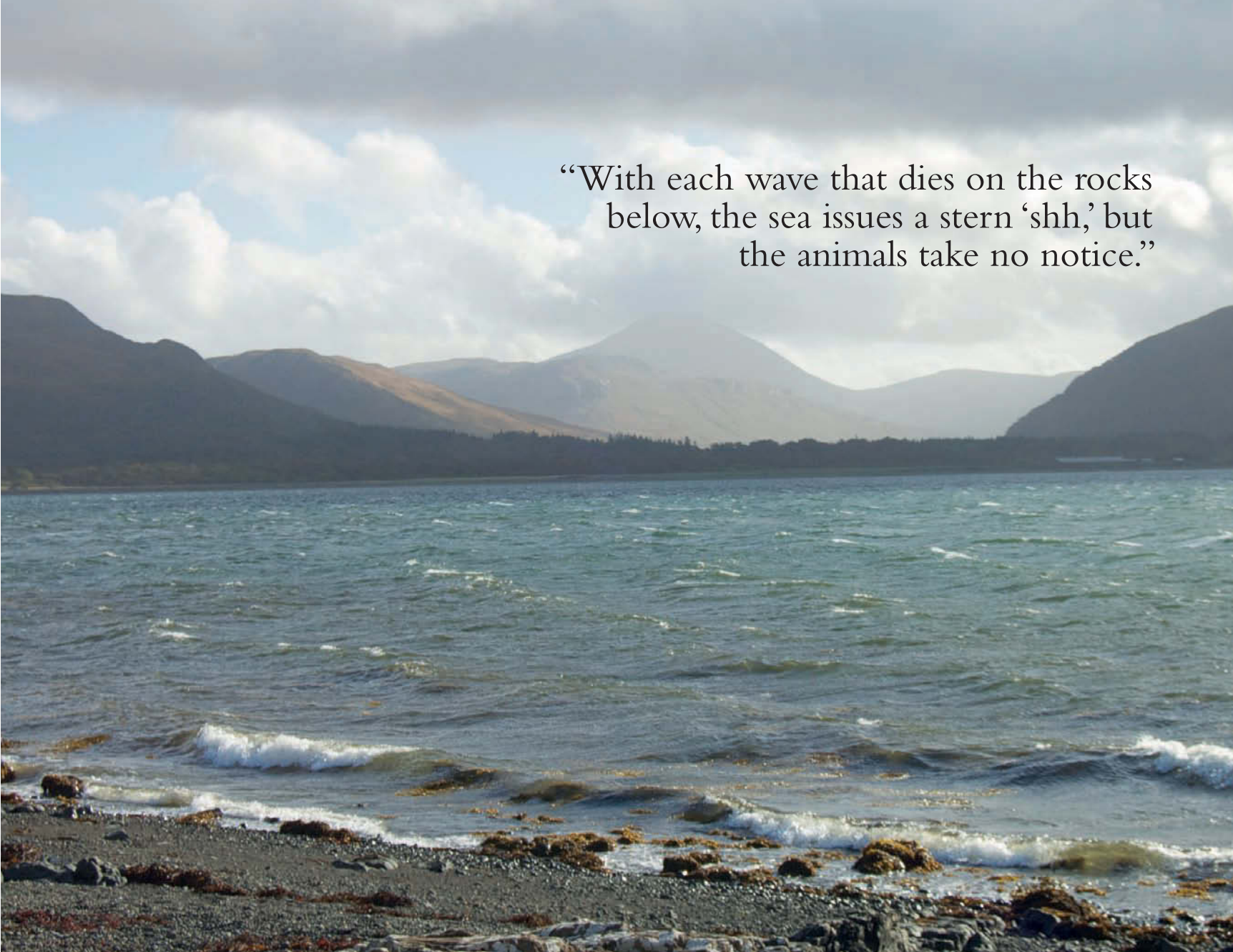
It turns out that the bellow of a cow – or even the plaintive cry of a mountainside blackface sheep – can sound eerily like a distant stag roar up here. And so we spend a lot of time craning our necks and trying to source a great antlered beast only to find it's a shaggy bovine instead.

But I also spend much of my time simply watching Norman. He scans the horizon constantly, occasionally stopping to look closer through binoculars. When we reach a great rusty-coloured plateau and move out on foot, he glides quietly across the boggy turf, taking account of wind direction and the contours of this strangely alien landscape.

We spot deer on the skyline – it's the only way I can seem to pick them up with any clarity – but they're a long way off, and apparently unstalkable.

Eventually, Norman stops, scans and turns to me slowly with a grin. He's onto something. There is a magnificent stag half-a-mile or so away with his harem, browsing across the top of a small hill. He's perfectly placed and very difficult to stalk – but the best stag we've seen by far this morning. The game is afoot.

To maintain as small a profile



“With each wave that dies on the rocks below, the sea issues a stern ‘shh,’ but the animals take no notice.”

as possible, we leave both Lee and Thompy behind. Thompy, particularly, is non-plussed.

For 10 or 15 minutes I walk in Norman's footsteps, slithering along wet rockface and ducking into sponge-soft valleys in a bid to get ahead of the herd and down into an area where we can approach unseen.

The sky has darkened dramatically, clouds scudding overhead, and I'm sweating and chilled at the same time. My heart hammers and my breath is ragged. I have a mental word with myself as we crouch in a gully.

Time passes imperceptibly as we crawl, on hands and knees now, through the sodden fronds of bracken that grow among the rocks and scree. Norman stops, slowly scans again with his binoculars and then slithers back down next to me.

The herd is still on the hillside, the stag now lying down in the bracken. We proceed around and just below the brow of our hill, crawling forward excruciatingly slowly, now on our bellies.

I hear an insistent whooshing sound overhead and risk a glance up.

A pair of ravens are circling.

They are expecting me to make a clean shot so that they can get their beaks into the gralloch. No pressure, then.

Finally, we inch into position and I find myself peering down the scope at the hill opposite. The sun is dipping in and out of the clouds and zaps blinding flashes of light down the scope. My vision blurs and my neck is cricked at an unnatural angle.

But the stag leaps into focus the moment the clouds drop in; a great red-brown beast chewing, zen-like, among the fronds. I can't get a shot at vital organs and we embark

on what proves to be a tortuous waiting game.

My muscles begin to cramp; my eyes water-up; my palms sweat; and overhead, like the ominous ticking of a bomb, raven wings pulse audibly through the still morning air.

When eventually the stag does rise, it feels like hours later, although it's only a matter of minutes. And as I centre the crosshairs behind his foreleg and touch off the trigger, the suspense reaches a crescendo.

In the echoing silence that follows I am unsure of what has ➡

RED DEER STALKING



“And as I centre the crosshairs behind his foreleg and touch off the trigger, the suspense reaches a crescendo...”

The author with his first red stag



Glengorm Castle

happened. There is nothing on the hillside and I look across to Norman who's watching carefully through binoculars.

He lets them fall around his neck, looks at me and smiles. “Good shot. He's down.”

I spend the rest of my time on Mull on other quests; distillery tour, boat trip, wildlife walks and, more than once, in Glengorm's glorious whisky library. I rediscover what it's like to watch a sea otter lunch on butterfish or a Golden Eagle dive like a lightning bolt from the heavens or a Hen Harrier dance over dun moorland

searching for rodents on a dreich, misty morning.

But what sticks with me the most is that morning on the hill, the view through the crosshairs, the sound of raven pinions and the roar of clashing stags.

Dad would have loved it.

CONTACT

Nick travelled to Mull with Virgin Trains and Caledonian MacBrayne. He stayed at Glengorm Castle and went red deer stalking on the Glengorm Estate.
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FIELD CRAFT FIRST

Pulling the trigger and delivering a carcass to the game dealer is just a small part of deer stalking. Will Pocklington looks at the bigger picture.

The hunter-gatherer instinct is still very much embedded in our make-up as human beings, an intrinsic part of our very nature that, I believe, drives us to hunt, shoot and fish.

Evolution is a slow process. Not so long ago we were actively pursuing our food with bows, arrows and spears, tracking beasts across a range of landscapes. To survive, one had to be proficient in fieldcraft, be aware of one's surroundings and be able to read signs and indicators. And in many cultures, they still do.

A missed track was a potentially fatal mistake. We had to be in tune with the natural world, and while this primitive pull is still far from lost, the respect, knowledge and understanding that is so closely intertwined with fieldsports is in danger of fading.

In deer stalking lies the perfect example. It is widely recognised as one of the fastest growing fieldsports in the UK – the primary reason for which, I suspect, lies in our DNA. Whether budding novice or hardened veteran, the thrill of the stalk, pitting one's wits

against a wild animal in its natural environment, satisfies our raw hunter-gatherer instincts. Pulling the trigger and delivering a carcass to the butchery block is the tip of the antler in a process that entails a sound familiarity with the quarry, its habitat and the fieldcraft that provides that imperative connection with the ecosystems in which we once, as humans, fitted in so much more naturally.

That stalking is becoming increasingly accessible to a wider demographic is great. But only if those looking to take up the sport

appreciate its finer nuances, all of which whittle down, eventually, to an utmost respect for the quarry and its environment and, subsequently, more fulfilling experiences in the field.

These are the foundations on which the Four Feathers rural courses are based. Run by Chris Wheatley-Hubbard and Dave Roderick, who I met recently in the rolling landscape of south Wiltshire, they combine a unique set of skills into one learning experience – tracking, woodland skills, stalking, butchery and more.

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Having grown up on the family farm, Chris has always had an appreciation and enthusiasm for the outdoors, an interest fuelled by spending much of his childhood with the old keeper on their private shoot, learning the ropes and developing an understanding for how the countryside functions – something instilled long before he ever shot any live quarry. The way it should be.

Indeed, the sad demise of this old role model figure is the inspiration for the rural courses which Chris and Dave now run. Who is there nowadays to teach newcomers the ways of the countryside and introduce them to field sports, properly? Mentoring is fundamental in the teaching of natural practices, yet it has all but disappeared in the modern world, victim to modern practices, formalised education and high-speed lives. Those



individuals who, years ago, would have been available as mentors – gamekeepers, woodsmen, stalkers – have seen their rural enterprises commercialised, with little or no time for apprentices. Once a natural right of passage, the imperative introduction to stalking that many received a generation ago is on the slide.

And it's not just about the ethics. People are bound to derive much more enjoyment and success from a day's stalking if they understand what is going on, and there is no

substitute for first-hand experience.

Of course, there are shooting grounds, rifle ranges and game butchery courses where the newcomer can learn about marksmanship, rifle safety and carcass preparation, but it is the combination of practical skills in the field, understanding the environment, the tracking, the affinity with the quarry – the bigger picture – that appears to be missing. The Four Feathers rural courses fill this void, offering a holistic approach.

FIELD CRAFT

Fieldcraft as a subject is vast. Its many elements combine and fuse to form a medley of age-old skills, knowledge and an improved understanding of nature. Stalking without fieldcraft is like watching a musical in a foreign language – you may get by, but with less understanding, enjoyment and

overall fulfilment.

Sitting at the core of the Four Feathers philosophy is comfort and familiarity in the environment in which you will be pursuing your quarry. If you are comfortable and familiar with your surroundings, you pick things up more easily: slight movements, or a change in the background sound. As a stalker, one must be able to recognise any variation from what Chris and Dave refer to as 'baseline' – the typical conditions for an environment. This can be particularly useful for stalkers who have regular access to ground over many seasons, and highlights the value of spending time without the rifle in areas where one has stalking permission, until it becomes second nature.

One such task that anybody can practice is learning how to settle into an environment and recognise the baseline as it is without human

RURAL SKILLS

intrusion, in its natural state, with a mind clear of day-to-day clutter and any predatory aspects.

TRACKING

Tracking is all about awareness, linked strongly with one's commitment to know their stalking ground. Its uses are multi-faceted.

It is rarely as straightforward as obvious slots in pristine clay, and takes into account flagging (the lay of vegetation) and action indicators (birdsong and wildlife behaviour). But even the basics of tracking can heighten one's awareness of what is happening in a particular environment. A trained eye can pick up a deer's gait, cadence, hoof profile, patterns of movement – helping to indicate areas frequented by deer at different times of the day, the species present, their behaviour.

Such wisdom can also help to establish the best place to situate a high seat or the most suitable position from which to take a shot off sticks, standing, kneeling or prone. Slot patterns can signal areas where deer are stopping to look around, browsing at a slow pace – ideal positions for a shot. High seat positions are significantly less effective in areas where deer will only travel at speed – where they may feel exposed, under threat or in danger.

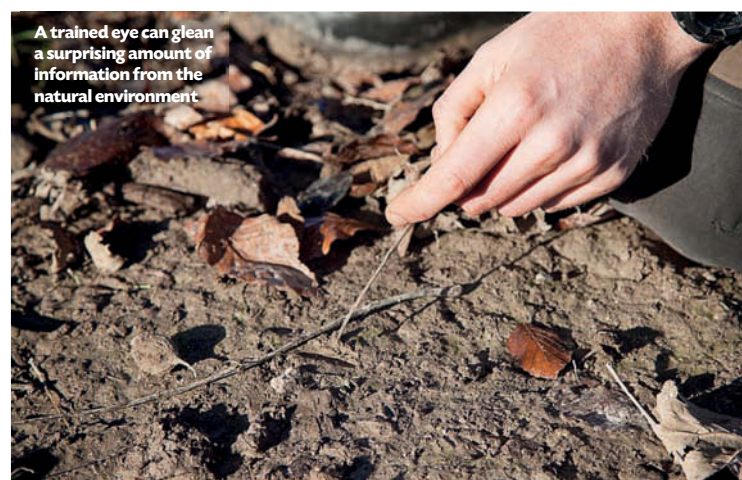
Fieldcraft can also bolster success for those stalking on new ground. Start in gateways, natural junctions in forest rides, habitat edges – natural channels where deer are most likely to be detected when undisturbed. Their baseline. Be mindful of a deer's essentials: water, food and shelter, and be aware of their reproductive cycles.

In the unfortunate event of wounding a deer, or when a bullet is placed correctly and yet the animal runs a hundred yards before expiring, tracking is invaluable.

"Not everyone has the luxury

of a deer-trained dog," says Chris. "If a shot deer runs, with a little coaching and an awareness of what to look for, the stalker can pick up a blood trail, tracks or signs indicating a direction of travel, and determine if it is slowing down or speeding up.

"As simple a detail as looking at the colour and content of the blood at the point of impact can



give an idea of the area of the body the bullet has penetrated: watery and flecked with green (intestine), bright pink (lung), dark red (liver), deep red (heart).

"Tracking is about collating details, to build a bigger picture. Imagine each sign as a letter of the alphabet, from which you create words, then sentences and eventually a story."

This is smarter stalking.

TAKING NOTES

The volume of information generated during such outings can be of great use and interest to the stalker frequenting a specific patch of land. Keeping a diary that details each trip out, with or without the rifle, can help identify trends and accurately depict populations.

Larder records are kept by all responsible deer managers in the UK, typically documenting the species, gender, weight of carcass,

health, load/rifle used. But a diary of one's time out in the field can go so much further – maps of deer whereabouts, what the weather was like, the time of day/year, distinguishing characteristics; behaviour; where it came from; where it was heading.

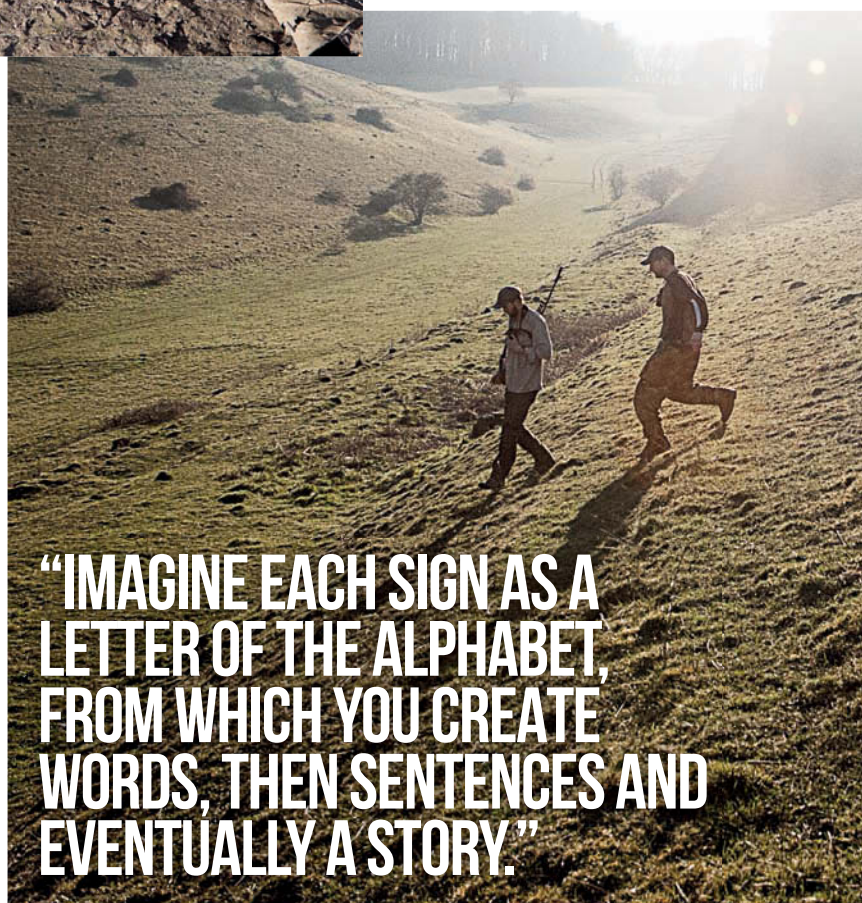
From this, over time, one can build a clearer picture and understanding of the deer in an

area. Chris has in the past even named some of the deer on his ground, such is his familiarity with them, and has a good idea of where he is most likely to see individuals, if they are likely to be in company, and when. This knowledge is a natural bi-product of time spent in the field, observing.

THE THREE S'S

After fieldcraft, comes marksmanship. But this involves much more than just placing a bullet in the right spot.

Movement can determine whether a stalk culminates in success or failure. Footfalls should be light and carefully considered. Eyes should be on the surroundings – maintaining a wide field of vision is important – whilst quietly assessing the route ahead for obstacles.



“Deer will often take you by surprise, especially in new territory,” Chris acknowledges. “It’s always advisable to consider every possibility when searching for them. Take nothing for granted and be prepared to adapt at any point.”

The main message behind the ‘Deer Run’ – Four Feathers’ simulated stalking exercise – is to be a safe, responsible, respectful Shot, following the three S’s guideline: Is it safe? Is it sensible? Is it suitable?

The exercise itself sees the stalker cross obstacles safely, use binoculars correctly to scan areas and establish if wooden deer silhouettes are in a safe position to shoot; considering the lie of the land, bullet drop, obstacles obstructing the shot, other deer nearby, whether it is a suitable animal to take (age and gender) and the likelihood of achieving a safe, clean, ethical kill.

Targets can then be engaged if deemed suitable, and then discussed as part of the exercise.

The rear-side of the silhouettes are detailed with a proportionate diagram of that species’ internal organs, which is invaluable for driving home the importance of bullet placement.

The fieldcraft, the safety and the marksmanship are all crucial elements and, if all goes well, each plays its part in the culmination of a successful stalk. But a stalk doesn’t end there. Butchery is also a prominent part of the Four Feathers rural courses. Knowing how to handle and prepare a deer in the larder is undoubtedly a crucial part of affording it the respect that it deserves. And, of course, venison is a very special end product – who wouldn’t want to make the most of it?

Learning in the field with an experienced stalker is invaluable

CONTACT

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www.ff-ruralcourses.co.uk

To learn more about Mike Robinson’s Game and Wild Food cookery courses:
Tel. 01635 200 200
E. info@gamecookeryschool.co.uk
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MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR DEER, WITH MIKE ROBINSON



Chefs who are preparing a deer for the restaurant have a real financial incentive to get the very most from a carcass. Here, I outline the primary and secondary cuts one can get from a beast, assuming that there is no major damage to the beast in question – any shot damage must be cut away since there will be lead fragments in the meat.

Assuming we are dealing with a fallow doe – a good middling-sized deer:

1) Remove the shoulders intact. Cut the shanks off the shoulders – it makes it easier to fit them in a casserole. Most people just mince the shoulders. I recommend you braise them slowly in red wine, garlic, onions and rosemary on a low heat for five hours. Then pull the meat to bits and do with it what you will – it makes great meat ragu.

2) Remove the haunches. Take off the shanks and freeze them for later braising – think Greek lamb shanks.

3) Bone out the haunches. Pull the primal muscles apart at the seams. Trim the sinew off with a boning knife. Cut the primals into steaks that we call pavé. Off a fallow like this you should get 15 off each haunch –

about 180g each. I like to make a herb marinade from olive oil, thyme, oregano, garlic and black pepper (whizzed up in a blender). Place them with a spoon of marinade in freezer bags, two at a time and label clearly. Suck out the air before you freeze them.

4) Remove the backstraps, cutting cleanly along the spine on either side. The muscle extends to the base of the neck. Time off the sinew, as though you were skinning a fish. Cut the sirloins (for that is what they are) into four-inch steaks and treat like the pavé above.

5) Remove the true fillets from under the ribs.

6) Take the large muscles from either side of the neck. Cut into small chunks for curry or casserole – the best braising cut on the animal. They will serve 4 – 6 people.

7) Take the time to trim all the bit and flank meat – basically everything that isn’t sinew. Mince it all down and you have enough for maybe 10 big burgers.

8) From a 30kg beast you should get about 80 portions all told – pretty amazing considering the cost of a cartridge!

Taking your time will result in less wastage



RIFLES

THE ONE GUN MAN

When it comes to hunting rifles, it's okay to have a favourite, says Peter Ryan.



I've owned a lot of rifles over the years, too many to be practical. Outdoors writers are more likely than most to accumulate new test equipment, especially those in some kind of pro staff or sponsorship arrangement. That's not my style and will remain unlikely after this piece – a celebration of the worn, the profoundly useful, the deeply loved.

'Beware the one gun man, he can probably use it' was a proverb of my boyhood. Thirty years and a ton of gear later, the gun safe got a spring cleaning. The collection was not replaced with new product, I simply kept a few firm favourites and left it at that. A much-loved side-by-side for pheasant, a deer stalking rifle and a big game piece. The last is nothing that would get a collector excited, just a simple factory Sako. It's probably different to your favourite, but that's not the issue. The point is that a rifle you know inside and out is far better than a safe full of gear. Let me tell you about it.

In my case it's a .375 H&H, simply because of the variety of game that the job entails, from Asian buffalo to the savannahs of Africa, and next to Alaska. The calibre really doesn't matter for this argument... it could be a .243 or .308 for deer, or a .223 for foxing. The point is that having one rifle that you absolutely know and have carefully tuned to your way of hunting is priceless.

For years, the factory stock worked well enough, but those of you with a long neck and arms will understand that, sooner or later, standard stock dimensions have their limits.



Mine came on a buffalo hunt in Australia's Arnhem Land. With the bull down we moved on to wild boar, but a series of awkward running shots made it clear that length of pull and drop were not quite right. We got the cull done, but it was harder than it needed to be, and so a new stock went on. The rifle always shot well, but now it fits like a glove and picking up a moving target quickly is a breeze.

Factory triggers are growing more stiff and unwieldy each year. Some that I've reviewed in recent times – especially those from the USA, where legal liability might be an issue – have been downright brutal. In this case the factory trigger broke without creep or drag, but even so it has been tuned slightly for a crisp let-off.

It's a simple fact that you can't hit what you can't see, yet every visit to the range you'll notice some wonderful rifle topped with a mediocre scope. Today I would rather have a reliable working piece with top-shelf glass than a fancy one with standard optics. The best opportunities at game come at first and last light, and while mid-range scopes are what they have always been, today's best scopes are simply breathtaking. Yes, they cost as much as your first car, but they're worth every penny, and a far better investment than buying another rifle

(at which point you just have two rifles with average glass).

More fine tuning? The original mounts were well made, but high and heavy. They have been replaced by vertical rings that sit lower on the receiver. Lighter but just as strong, and there's no chance of skinning a knuckle while working the bolt under pressure. All of these adjustments took time to understand, but the result is a superbly fitted rifle for a fraction of the cost of a bespoke build.

Owning many rifles means many sets of ballistics – not the handiest thing in the world when the trophy of a lifetime is at maximum range, the wind is swirling and he's about to be gone. Throw in the fact that some stalkers use several loads in each rifle, and it's a lot to carry around in your mind. Better by far to know one rifle with one top quality load. Minimise the variables and you don't have to think under pressure, in fact you don't have to think at all. What's left is focus and reflex, the way it should be. That's hardly an original observation. It comes from the late, great Malcolm Cooper, possibly the finest marksman in the world in his day. He knew his business.

Of course, all of that is merely technical. The greatest advantage of having a close favourite is

RIFLES

The combination of a trusty rifle that you know well, and a well-tested top quality load will give you confidence in tricky situations



confidence. The latest wonder weapon might have captured your imagination, but since it's never done anything for you, a tricky shot on the last stalking day is still a question mark. There's always that nagging doubt when the partnership has only gone as far as sighting in. Does this thing hold its zero after a bump, or a soaking? With an old friend it's different – you simply know that this is going to work. Lean into my shoulder, Old Lucky, here we go.



There's no substitute for that.

Finally, there's sentimental value – every nick, every small scratch has a story, tiny echoes of a moment in time. It might be that grain or two of red Kalahari sand still caught in the chequering, or a little scrape from a misstep on a mist-covered mountain. The blue starting to go on the bolt handle, worn by your own hand and the passing years. Sure, it might not mean much now, but it will one day, when older legs find the hill too high and what's left are memories.

In traditional Japanese culture, an ancient item like a china vase is not repaired invisibly as we might attempt to do, but using gold to make the chip stand out, a celebration of age and wear. I have that feeling for my old favourite, and for that reason was happy to put my initials on the grip cap. I know now it will never be sold. A trifle worn, it was there through some tricky moments, and did not fail even with game that would have happily killed us. If he wants to follow me, it will go to my son one day.

Which brings us to the matter of great old guns with adventure written all over them, whose owners have passed into history leaving a favourite behind. They still work, and have a magic about them that cannot be denied... but that's a story for another day.



You know you'll never sell it, so knocks, scrapes and personal touches all add to a rifle's sentimental value, says the author



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Jessie Platt
(nee Thorneycroft)
with her head
stalker, Murdo
Macrae (centre) &
ghillie, c1880s



Miss Jessie Thorneycroft,
Mrs Platt's niece and heir
at Eishken, a keen lady
stalker, c1860

Ladies of the hill

David S. D. Jones unearths some fascinating and impressive accounts of the very first female deer stalkers in Britain.

Today, it is not unusual to find a lady stalking deer in the Highlands of Scotland. One hundred years ago, however, few members of the fairer sex dared to go out on the hill in pursuit of stags and hinds, and those who did were invariably great characters. Indeed, writing in the mid-1890s, an unnamed sportswoman using the appropriate pseudonym of 'Diana Chasseresse' advised potential female stalkers: "Deer stalking is like a marriage, it should not

be enterprised nor taken in-hand un-advisedly or lightly, nor should it be undertaken by those who are weak and delicate, for it entails many hardships and much exposure to wet and cold."

Jessie Thorneycroft, one of the first lady deer stalkers in Scotland, took up the sport in 1865 at the age of 17 years when she shot her first stag and caught her first salmon in the forest of Glentanar in Aberdeenshire. The daughter of a wealthy Black Country ironmaster, she was very much 'trade' so did not have to conform to the conventions of Victorian 'society' which dictated that women should only appear on the shooting field either for luncheon or as spectators!

In 1876, Jessie married Joseph Platt, a rich textile machinery manufacturer, who was keen on both stalking and fox hunting. Not surprisingly, the couple spent their honeymoon in pursuit of deer in the forest of Glenbruar in Perthshire.

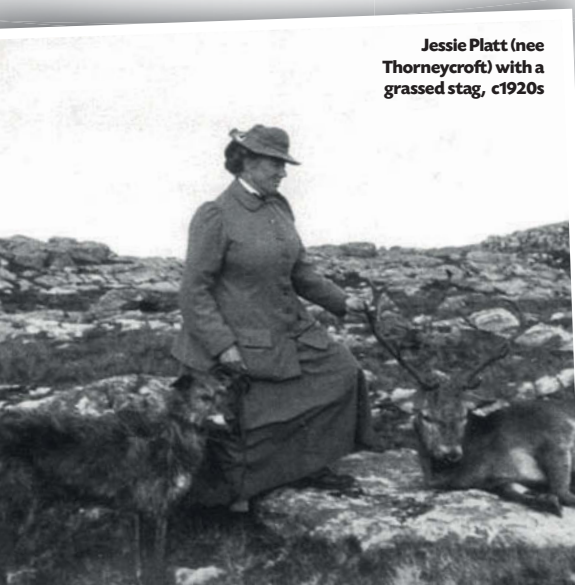
For the next decade, Jessie and her husband spent the stalking season each year visiting various deer forests in Sutherland, Ross-shire, the Outer Hebrides and the Isle of Skye. Then, in 1886, they secured a long lease on the 69,000-

acre Park Deer Forest on the Isle of Lewis.

Jessie and her husband soon turned Park into a stalkers paradise, building a 'state of the art' mansion, Eishken Lodge, installing a telegraph office in a nearby village, constructing miles of stalking tracks throughout the forest, acquiring a steam yacht for transport to and from the mainland and a steam launch for conveying stalking parties to remote parts of the forest which were more accessible by sea than land. In 1887, their first full season on the property, the Platts bagged a total of 41 stags and eight hinds.

Park quickly became a mecca for rich and influential stalkers, including Alfred Bonham-Carter, referee for private bills in the House of Commons, and Sir Felix Semon, personal physician to King Edward VII, but few could beat Jessie when it came to securing a good stag with a minimum number of shots.

Sadly, Joseph Platt died in 1907 after two decades at Park. The deer forest then passed to Jessie who reigned over the property for the next 38 years. In her final season, aged 86, she could only manage one day out on the hill but succeeded in grassing a stag. She died in



Jessie Platt (nee
Thorneycroft) with a
grassed stag, c1920s



Hilda Murray of Elibank, c1910

February, 1935, having stalked continuously for 70 seasons, then a unique record for a woman in Scottish deer stalking circles!

Alma, Marchioness of Breadlebane, another early lady deer stalker, came from an entirely different background to Jessie Platt, being Scottish aristocracy rather than 'trade.' Born in the 1840s, the youngest daughter of the 4th Duke of Montrose, she began her stalking career in the late 1880s in the 80,000-acre Blackmount Deer Forest in Argyll-shire, one of several top sporting properties owned by her husband, the 1st Marquess of Breadlebane.

Alma always went out on the hill in great style, dressed in grey Blackmount tweed,

accompanied by one of her husband's professional stalkers, and armed with a bespoke Purdey Express rifle. Her stalking prowess was equal to that of any man and she would happily walk many miles to a distant beat in pursuit of a good stag.

Amongst her many stalking achievements, Alma shot a record 18-point stag at Blackmount on August 27, 1897, weighing 19 stone 2lb, a 13-pointer stag with an inside span of 37" in 1891, and six stags with six shots on September 30, 1897. She wrote a classic book, *High Tops of Blackmount*, about her stalking experiences in 1907 and continued to stalk deer for many years after that.

Hilda Murray of Elibank, who had been taught how to stalk deer by Alma, Marchioness of Breadlebane, was also noted as an early lady stalker. Considered to be one of the leading sportswomen during the Edwardian period, she regularly visited Blackmount, accounting for a number of good stags with her Fraser Single .303 Velox rifle. She was also an accomplished angler, a crack Shot at covert shoots and an outstanding rider in the hunting field!

Lady Sophie Scott, the beautiful wife of Sir Samuel Scott, Bt., owner of the 35,000-acre Amhuinnsuidhe Deer Forest on the Isle of Harris in the Outer Hebrides, was one of the first female members of the English aristocracy to stalk deer in the Highlands. From the early Edwardian period until the time of her death in 1937, she travelled to Scotland annually in pursuit of deer, and, between 1918 and 1937, killed a total of 698 stags on Harris alone (she also shot 231 hinds on Harris between 1929 and 1937). She was also the first lady to successfully catch trout on the Houghton Club waters of the River Test in Hampshire.

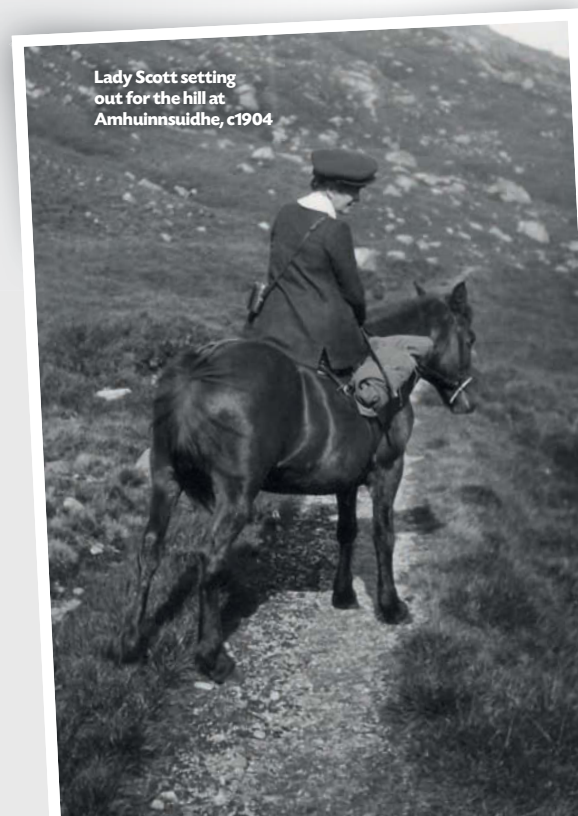
A true stalker to the end, Lady Scott lies buried with her husband in a mausoleum in the

Amhuinnsuidhe Deer Forest.

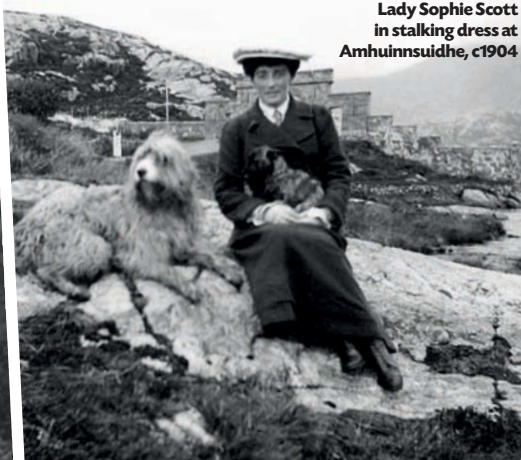
The most remarkable early lady deer stalker, though, was undoubtedly Lady Evelyn Cobbold, owner of the 14,500-acre Glencarron Deer Forest in Ross-shire from 1922 until the time of her death in 1963. An Anglo-Scottish aristocrat who was born in 1867, she was a daughter of the 7th Earl of Dunmore and a granddaughter of the 2nd Earl of Leicester, owner of the celebrated Holkham shoot in Norfolk. Married to John Cobbold, a member of the well-known Suffolk brewing dynasty, she was not only an accomplished stalker, angler and travel writer but was a convert to Islam and, in 1933 at the age of 66, became the first English woman to make the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

Lady Cobbold, who had taken up stalking during the late Victorian period, ruled Glencarron with a rod of iron for over 40 years with the help of a team of loyal stalkers and ghillies. In addition to grassing around 45 stags and 25 hinds annually prior to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, she accounted for two exceptional royals in 1924 and 1929. Like her contemporary, Lady Scott, she was buried on the hill – her final request was to lie "where the stags will run over my grave". Her funeral service at Glencarron in 1963 was conducted according to Islamic rites with a piper playing laments on the bagpipes.

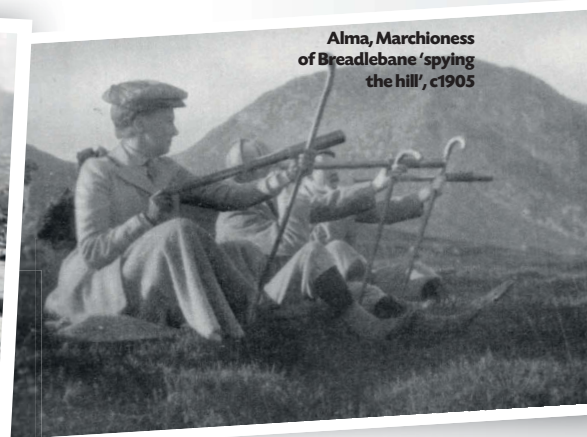
In a strange sort of way, Jessie Platt, Alma, Marchioness of Breadlebane, Hilda Murray of Elibank, Lady Sophie Scott and Lady Evelyn Cobbold, all of whom had grown up in male dominated Victorian Britain, were pioneers of 'Women's Lib', long before the phrase had even been coined, through their desire to compete on equal terms with their menfolk in the deer forests and on the salmon rivers of the Highlands of Scotland.



Lady Scott setting out for the hill at Amhuinnsuidhe, c1904



Lady Sophie Scott in stalking dress at Amhuinnsuidhe, c1904



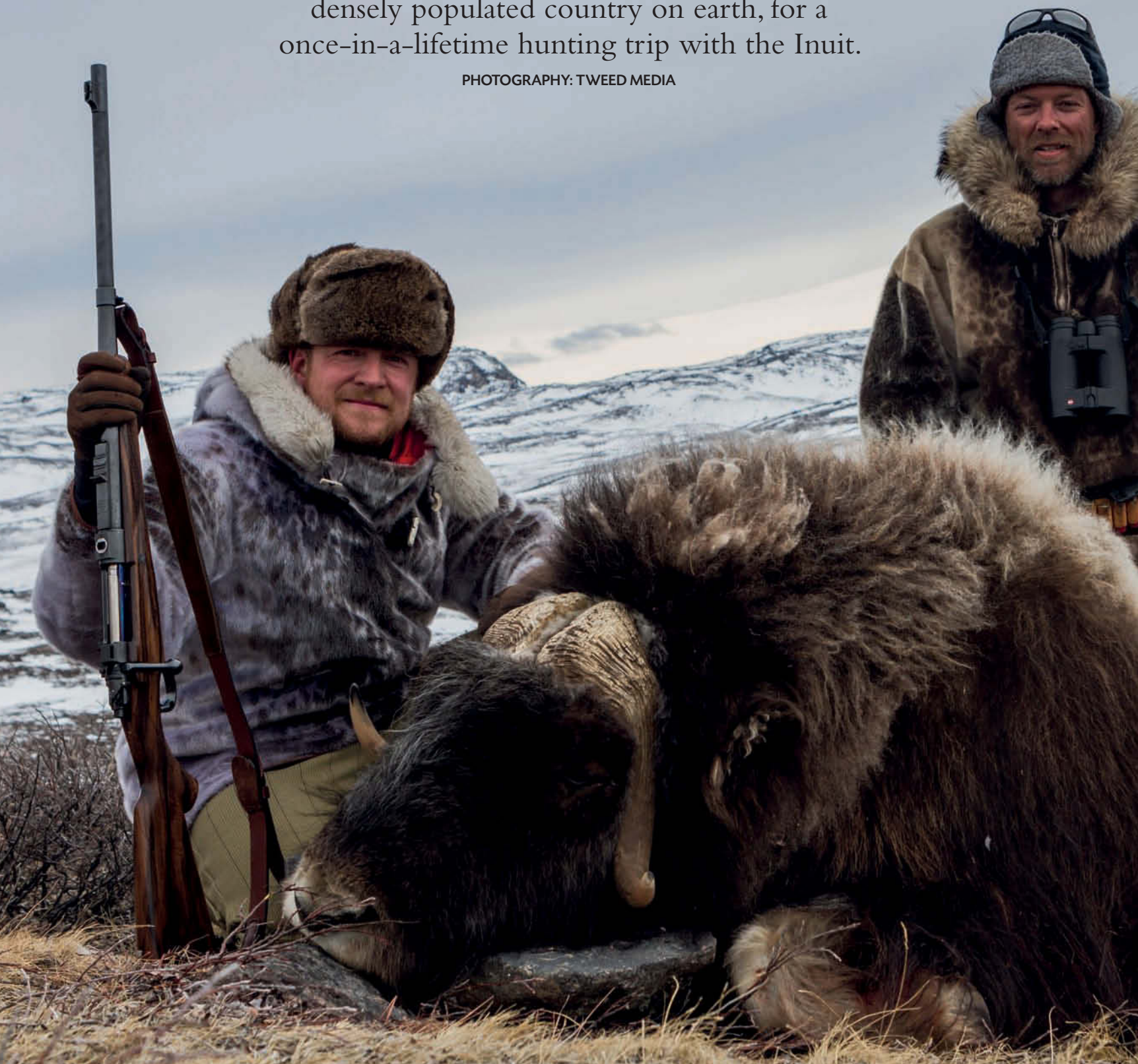
Alma, Marchioness of Breadlebane 'spying the hill', c1905

FOREIGN FORAYS

POLAR SAFARI

Simon Barr heads to Greenland, the least densely populated country on earth, for a once-in-a-lifetime hunting trip with the Inuit.

PHOTOGRAPHY: TWEED MEDIA



Simon Barr and his guide Jan Pederson with the author's muskox, taken on the final day of his trip



The hunting cabin, overlooking the Kangerlussuaq Fjord

From a young age, I have been fascinated by cultures in which traditional forms of hunting are still part of everyday life. Today, as an avid and reasonably well-travelled hunter, I have been lucky enough to hunt with people from some of these ancient cultures and observe the skills and methods they employ first-hand. Last year, I decided to fulfill an ambition to hunt with the native Inuit inside the Arctic Circle. I have long been fascinated by how they go about harvesting nature's bounty in the brutal sub-zero temperatures, and wondered if I would be able to cope with such extremes.

Since Greenland was colonised by humans some 5,000 years ago, the diet of its people has been mostly made up of animal protein. The unforgiving landscape is simply too harsh for edible plants to prosper. Today, the country has advanced somewhat. Supermarkets supplied twice a year by container ship offer frozen vegetables, cereals and bread. But the Inuit's taste for meat persists.

Greenland is an autonomous country within the Kingdom of Denmark and is the world's biggest island, covering some 2.2 million square kilometres. Quite simply, it is a vast, bleak landscape of little more than ice, rock and snow. It is also the least densely populated country in the world and is home to just 60,000 people, with 89 per cent of the population made up of native Inuit, a people who until 50 years ago lived solely by subsistence hunting. Hunting is in their blood.

My polar safari started in the western town of Kangerlussuaq, a settlement of 530 people – by Greenlandic standards, a large town. Situated on the outer edge of the Greenland ice cap, which covers 80 per cent of the country's territory and is the second largest body of ice in the world after Antarctica, Kangerlussuaq was an American air base founded in 1941. The base closed in 1992 when the threat of the Cold War subsided, but the surrounding area has always been home to many species of Greenland's endemic fauna.

The Inuit are highly skilled hunters. Their sustainable, no-waste culture encompasses caribou, polar bear, seal, walrus, king eider duck, ptarmigan, Arctic hare, Arctic fox and the mighty muskox. Every morsel of all harvested game is used in some way. In addition, they also hunt beluga and minke whale, as well as the tusked and peculiar looking narwhal, using a traditional method in which the beasts are hunted from small boats ♦♦



FOREIGN FORAYS

using harpoons attached to inflated sealskin bladders.

My first intake of cold Greenlandic air was quite literally breathtaking. The insides of my nostrils froze and it became very apparent that my buffalo and kudu skin safari boots weren't going to withstand the -25°C temperatures. A quick change into fleece-lined and insulated Sorels was needed.

After landing, I met my guide, Karsten Lings. Leaving the very basic airport, we drove past several charming timber houses with sealskins stretched across frames, drying in the moisture-free sub-zero breeze. Nestled on the edge of the spectacular Kangerlussuaq Fjord with far-reaching 360-degree views, our accommodation was basic but cosy – a simple cabin with a wood burner and no electricity. As my base for the next three nights, it would become a welcome respite after the physical and mental challenge of the hunting that was to come.



Arctic fox tracks

My first day's hunting started with a sunny view of the fjord and the wind-scoured mountains running alongside it, which reminded me a little of the Scottish West Coast in the depths of winter. After a breakfast of eggs and fish, I got onto the skidoo behind Jan Pedersen, one of Karsten's experienced guides. Our first expedition took us along the fjord in search of Arctic hare. Dog sleds were the most popular mode of transport until a few years ago when skidoos took over as a more effective means of getting around the barren landscape.

Riding the skidoo over the frozen fjord was bracing! The wind-chill sapped my body temperature. The ice needs to be a minimum of 10cm thick to support the weight of our vehicle and violent storms known as piteraqs can blow off the ice cap without warning. I had to put my trust in Jan and put out of my mind the stories of people plummeting to their death through unseen fissures in the ice. But, before long, a greater concern arose as it became apparent that my high-tech man-made fibre clothing was no match for the extreme cold. A thick sealskin smock adorned with a hood trimmed by sled dog fur soon remedied the problem – proof enough that animals that evolved in this environment are better equipped to deal with the extremes than we are.

The good thing about the bitter cold is that animals tend to favour the edges of the fjord as these areas provide them with some respite from the wind. After glassing the mountainous edges, we spotted the first of our chosen quarry in a small gully, sitting in some wind-blown snow. The brilliant white of the Arctic hare is perfect camouflage against a pure white background. Stalking to within shotgun range involved traipsing carefully over



The author with his first walked-up Arctic hare

the broken edges of the fjord – a delicate business. Because the ice shelf rises and lowers on each tide, deep crevices and peaks are formed over time as the edge is crumpled upwards and then lowered again. After negotiating this obstacle course, we got into position to walk-up the hare between rock valleys and snowdrifts. When flushed, the hare bolted up the rock faces offering some spectacular sport with a shotgun and an excellent start to my trip.

Having taken two brace over a few hours, we secured the game

to a sled which was towed behind the skidoo. Jan then suggested a few hours of traditional Inuit ice fishing with handlines and rubber lures. Cutting a deep hole into the hard-packed ice at the edge of the fjord with a sharp spear soon got the blood flowing to my extremities again! Beneath the ice, the fish were hungry – in no time at all, we had landed around 12 Arctic cod, a species which grows to 30cm and is the favourite food of narwhals and other Arctic whales. Our catch was destined for various purposes: some would be traditionally air-dried to



Ice fishing for Arctic cod, a few of which were used to bait Arctic foxes



A harsh and barren landscape



Until recently, dog sleds were the most popular mode of transport for the Inuit. Although skidoos are more commonly used these days, dog sleds are by no means obsolete



snack on, some would be used for a fish stew and some would be left as bait for Arctic fox.

My second day saw us back on the ice with Arctic fox and ptarmigan in our sights. The Arctic fox, also known as the white, polar or snow fox, is native to the Arctic regions and well adapted to living in cold environments. They have thick, deep fur, a good supply of body fat and a countercurrent heat exchange system in their paws which helps them to retain core body temperature. Averaging about 85cm in length, they prey on any small animals they can find including Greenland lemmings, and will also eat carrion, berries, seaweed – and Arctic cod. The subject of much Arctic mythology, the fox is a source of both fur and meat and over the past few hundred years has provided considerable income for local communities.

As we came into sight of our cod bait that we had left the day before, I saw a white flash as a fox headed for the safety of land, obviously disturbed by the noise of the motor. As the skidoo slithered to a standstill, I used the seat as a rest and lined-up on my first ever Arctic fox. I took a confident shot with the 6.5x55 at over 200m, using little holdover to compensate. The fox dropped instantly. Remarkably, another, this time with a brown coat, suddenly appeared from behind some ice at the edge of the fjord. A little further than the last, I cleanly dispatched this one, too. Foxes are wily adversaries and a brace on one hunt was something of a rarity.

Despite the inhospitable landscape, Greenland is actually home to around 235 species of bird, the majority of which are migratory. Ptarmigan are Greenland's only galliform, but can be found in a variety of terrains. They are also a popular local

delicacy and make for challenging shooting, their plumage changing from a well-camouflaged brown in the summer to completely white in the winter. The rest of the day was spent scouring the landscape for these stunning birds, before walking them up with a shotgun, making for some hard but rewarding sport. By the end of the day, I was well and truly bushed and never has a fish stew felt more well deserved.

I woke up early on the third day and was instantly filled with excitement as we would be going on a traditional Inuit hunt for muskox, a creature that looks to me like a polar buffalo. Due to overcast conditions, there was a noticeable rise in the air temperature, making the long journey across the frozen fjord significantly less painful! Muskox are big, powerful and tough animals, so I had opted for an open-sighted .416 Rigby Big Game rifle paired with Hornady DGX (Dangerous Game Expanding) 400-grain ammo.

Known in Greenlandic as 'umimmaq', meaning 'the long-bearded one', the muskox is a tundra dweller more closely related to goat and sheep than true cattle. In 1958, 27 muskox were released nearby onto an open hunting district of some 6,600 square kilometres. Over a period of 40 years, the population is estimated to have grown to at least 7,000 head. And, with plentiful fodder available, the Kangerlussuaq muskox are 15 per cent heavier than those found elsewhere in Greenland, reaching weights of up to 400kg. Bulls are also likely to attack if they feel threatened, so must be treated with utmost respect.

Karsten explained that the animals exist in big groups during the winter, but split up into smaller groups and individuals during the spring and as they enter the rut in August. The females live to around ➡

FOREIGN FORAYS

25 years, while the males reach 15–18 years – both losing around 40 per cent of their body weight during the winter. Management is vital for the health of the herd and numbers today are stable thanks to hunting for their skin, incredibly well insulated fur, and meat, which is highly valued on the open market.

Little stirs in Greenland. When the skidoo finally stopped, the only sound I could hear was ice sizzling against the hot exhaust. The vastness of the barren landscape is difficult to describe and, as I took in my surroundings, I was overwhelmed by the remoteness and stark beauty of it all. But it is a truly inhospitable environment and without the indispensable knowledge and advice of a local guide, most visitors would soon perish. As I was soon to discover, a bit of walking leads to sweating and overheating which, in

turn, leads to chilling which can be seriously dangerous. Taking off a glove to adjust a camera or scope can result in aching fingers and near frostbite. Existing in such extreme cold draws hugely on the body's fuel reserves and requires careful and close attention. Hunting alongside Karsten and his team, and seeing how well adapted the Inuit are to such an extreme environment, left me with enormous respect for this ancient and fascinating people.

With the skidoo unloaded, we started our long hike into the tundra in search of these magnificent prehistoric-looking animals. Muskox are not the most challenging creatures to hunt but the conditions are brutal, making it a superb sporting challenge.

There are no trees on the tundra, or indeed anywhere in Greenland, and the beasts usually have the high ground advantage, so



planning a long downwind route using dead ground is the only way to outsmart them. If they see or smell you, they steadily walk off, taking you further from the relative safety of your skidoo.

After a dedicated upward climb and a final crawl, I came up on my animal that was stood feeding in a group of three around 100m away. This was as far as I was willing to shoot with express sights. I rose up and took the first shot freehand without the animals realising I was there. As there was no apparent reaction from the animal, I immediately took a second shot.



Nothing goes to waste

The mature bull ran a matter of metres and toppled. The satisfaction was immense. By luck, we managed to get the skidoo fairly close to the animal so that we could haul it out and skin and butcher it closer to the safety of camp.

With the muskox skinned and efficiently butchered, it was nearly dark as I walked towards my cabin, the scent of hot food signalling the end of my final day in the Arctic. But I had one last task to perform before heading back to the UK.

Under the light of a head torch, I set about skinning both Arctic foxes whilst reliving the unforgettable events of the past three days. It had been an incredible trip. But it wasn't over. As I peered up at what had been a dark and featureless sky only moments before, I was suddenly treated to a sight as spectacular as a Namibian sunset. Swirling across the vast northern sky, the vivid green hues of the Aurora Borealis of Northern Lights suddenly lifted like morning mist as I lost a sense of time. It was a moment I will certainly never forget. Hunting in Greenland in such unrelenting conditions is a unique and unforgettable adventure and one I would highly recommend.



Simon with his prized brace of Arctic foxes

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STALKING

MODERN SPORTING OPTICS

Steve Rawsthorne highlights some of the recent advances made in sporting optics technology, and explains why it's a good idea to spend as much as you can afford on a rifle scope for stalking.





Over the last 20 years, and at an increasing pace in the last five, there have been huge developments in rifle scope technology, along with a noticeable hike in the price of top-end optics. But what is just marketing hype, and what is of real practical benefit to the hunter?

The basics of what we need as a rifle hunter have not changed over the years. There is a trend now towards longer range shots, and several of the major manufactures are offering bullet drop compensators (BDCs) or ballistic turrets, and then there are the out-and-out tactical target scopes, either in minutes of angle, (MOAs) or Mills, (milliradians) with reticles in the first or second plane. Glass and the coating applied to it have also been vastly improved, allowing us to shoot later into the evening or earlier in the morning.

As a woodland stalker, most of our stalking will take place at first or last light, so light-gathering ability is vital to make the most of our opportunities. This is where the premium brands – Swarovski, Zeiss, Schmidt & Bender and Leica – really score. They quote light transmission rates in excess of 90 per cent for their top-end scopes, but you will have to pay for this quality, certainly in excess of £1,500, and possibly as much as £2,000.

A scope is subject to huge forces every time you squeeze the trigger and it needs to be built to withstand this. Top-end scopes have steel gearing – what moves the reticle to the left, right or vertically – while cheaper, lesser quality ones have gearing of softer brass or even plastic, which will not last as long or even hold zero.

The coating applied to lenses has developed hugely too; they can be fully coated, fully multi-coated or multi-coated. The coating on a lens affects its light transmission rates and 'flare', the

distortion around an image. Years ago, lenses had a single coating of magnesium fluoride applied to one surface of the lens. Today's premium scopes have computer controlled and applied multi-layer coatings applied to both surfaces of the lenses to give you the crispest, most distortion-free image possible and allow you to shoot for those extra golden minutes at last or first light and in the most adverse weather conditions.

The hill stalker tends to stalk during the day and to shoot over longer ranges. As a result, the light-gathering abilities of a scope may not be as important, and some form of bullet drop compensator may be of use. Everything else in terms of quality of manufacture applies as above.

The next thing to consider is objective size and magnification. As the level of magnification increases, the light transmission decreases and the field of view shrinks in size. In practise, this means that in poor light we want to use the minimum magnification necessary to make a clean shot, so we have the widest, brightest image available. Years ago, snipers made do

variable power of 5 to 25 and an objective lens of 56mm with an illuminated reticle. For most hunters I would recommend an objective lens of 50 or 56mm and a variable magnification of 2 to 12. This will allow you to shoot in all light conditions and out to 300 yards, assuming you are capable of that. The very low magnification means you could use the scope when on a Monteria or driven boar shoot or in a high seat at night for boar.

As a stalker with just one rifle or one scope and several rifles, hunting across a range of species and times of day, we want a scope with one piece construction (i.e. the tube is machined from one piece of metal, not two or three screwed together), fully multi-coated lenses with high light transmission rates and steel gearing. Spend as much as you can afford and then a bit more! You could buy one premium scope such as a Swarovski, Zeiss or Leica with a bullet drop compensator and fit it with quick detachable mounts then have multiple zero points on the turret for the

different rifles/calibres, switching it between them with no loss of zero, which makes it very cost effective. An objective lens of 50 or 56mm and magnification of around 2 to 12, from a premium manufacturer should cover all the options. So much for the basics, now we come to the bells and whistles!

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

The first desirable extra on my list would be an illuminated reticle. I know some people suggest they lead to stalkers taking shots when

they shouldn't, but when you have a dark fallow standing against a wood at last light, the ability to see clearly where your crosshairs are is invaluable. Turned up to its brightest and coupled with the low magnification setting on your adjustable scope, it's great for running boar or turned down low if sitting in a kunzle in the moonlight for the same boar. ➡

“AS A WOODLAND STALKER, MOST OF OUR STALKING WILL TAKE PLACE AT FIRST OR LAST LIGHT, SO LIGHT-GATHERING ABILITY IS VITAL TO MAKE THE MOST OF OUR OPPORTUNITIES.”

with 6x42 scopes, a magnification of six and an objective lens of 42mm. Nowadays, the military around the world have taken the best of sporting scope technology and adapted it to their use, so sporting and military scopes now drive developments in scope design and feed off each other. As an example, the British sniper scope is an S&B Police Marksman II with a

STALKING

Recent developments from Swarovski, Zeiss and Leica include motion sensors, so that when you lay your rifle down in a seat or stand it on its end in a künzle it automatically switches off to preserve battery life, but automatically turns back on to the setting you left it at when you pick it up and take aim. The new Schmidt & Bender Stratos and the Zeiss V8, not available in the UK, have programmable reticles – plug them into your PC via a USB cable and off you go. I personally am a fan of the Swarovski Z6 version where you set your day and night levels to suit your needs.

At a 150 yards, the drop on an average calibre bullet, such as the .308 Win. is insubstantial when zeroed at 100 yards, at 200 its about 2", at 250 it is around 7 or 8", at 300 it is 12" and at 400 it is around 29 or 30". These are for a 165gr softpoint, but most deer legal calibres will be fairly similar. When I shoot my .308 tactical rifle at Bisley at a 1,000 yards, the drop is around 36ft(!). You obviously can't aim off that amount, so you need something more precise. Let me say now that I am not advocating long range shots on deer or other sentient animals. I limit myself to 300 yards. Even so, a bullet

drop compensator takes the guess work out of such a shot so you can be more confident of a clean kill.

BDCs are a development of tactical or target turrets. A sniper or target shooter would establish the distance to the target and then by reference to a ballistic program or chart, dial in the required elevation to compensate for the bullet-drop, either in minutes of angle, (MOA) or mil-rads, (MRAD or milliradian). Actually, the harder part is allowing for windage and, if there is much cross wind, you are better off not taking a shot at extended ranges.

For the stalker, a simple to operate system is a boon, where you just turn a turret to the desired range and shoot. First, you need to establish accurately the range to your deer – a laser range finder is essential, I have binoculars with a built-in range finder, rather than carry two separate bits of kit – then just dial in your range. Zeiss have their ASV system on the Victory HT range of scopes and Leica have a similar system. Basically, you zero your rifle at 100 yards and then go to a ballistic program on the manufacturer's website and input the bullet weight, ballistic co-efficient, barrel length, height of the sight above the barrel and speed of the bullet. To get the speed of the bullet accurately, you will need a chronograph and the use of a range.

Once you have done this, you should go to a rifle range and test the scope/turret/bullet combination at the ranges you have set it up for. Do not, under any circumstances, rely on the program to shoot at anything live until you have tested it thoroughly on a range. As with any computer program, garbage in = garbage out, so you owe it to your quarry to do this properly.

Although it sounds complicated, if you read the manuals and do it properly, it's not difficult. I recently bought a Swarovski Z6i 2.5-15x56 with a ballistic turret to fit to my custom 7-08 rifle. I downloaded the program from the manufacturer's website and input the data required. I had the choice of various standard factory ammunition or inputting my own hand load data, which I did. I zeroed the scope at 150 yards on the range at work and then set up the rings as directed by the program and manual for 200, 250 and 300 yards. The next day I was at Bisley and went straight to 300 yards and the first five rounds went straight in the bull. Down to 200 and exactly the same result, so now I would be happy to shoot a deer with it, but only after I had tested it properly. Bear in mind that if you change your bullet weight, manufacturer or add or remove a moderator, you will have to do the whole process again. You need to have a zero stop function on the BDC, so that you can turn it back to the zero range without fail.

Some manufacturers produce scopes with a ballistic reticle, so that there is the normal cross hair with several stadia lines below it. Again, you need all the information about your chosen ammunition and the manufacturer's program. Input this and it will give you the distance the stadia lines correspond to for that round at one magnification unless the reticle is in the first focal plane, in which case it will apply across all magnifications. I have a 2-12x50 scope with a three stadia reticle which, at 12x gives me 250,



300 and 400 yard hold points for my particular bullet. But if I reduce the magnification, the point of impact changes dramatically, by up to several feet. If I set my magnification to 12x, know the range to my target, I just hold the corresponding line on it and away we go. Simple and intuitive to use.

Tactical or target turrets come in two measurements, either minutes of angle, basically 1.047 inches at a 100 yards, or milliradian, often referred to as MRAD or mils, which are 1/1,000 of the radius to the target, or one metre at a thousand, one yard at a thousand, etc. You need the aid of a ballistic program and all the data previously described. From this you can model the trajectory of your bullet and so what the compensation is at various ranges in either mils or MOA. If you have a mil-dot reticle, you want to have your scope turret graduations in mils – don't mix mils and minutes, it just adds a further layer of calculation and potential error. There are all sorts of types of reticles – Horus and Nightforce have their own versions. Unlike a BDC, you need to either memorise the range/compensation or have a little card stuck to your stock. A zero stop function, where when you turn the turret back as far as it will go returns it to your zero position, is vital, otherwise in the dark or heat of the moment you can lose your base position.

A reticle in the first focal plane grows in size with the target as

you increase the magnification on a variable scope, so it is constant at all ranges and magnifications. One in the second focal plane remains the same size as magnification changes, so is accurate only at one magnification. For a standard crosshair, this makes no difference, but for mil-dot reticles and similar designs, it is much simpler and safer to have the reticle in the first focal plane. Mil-dots are best left

“WHEN YOU CAN CONSISTENTLY SHOOT 4" GROUPS ON THE RANGE AT 300 YARDS, YOU CAN START TO THINK ABOUT LONGER SHOTS IN THE REAL WORLD.”

to snipers and long range target shooters. For a hunting scope, stick with a ballistic turret or ballistic reticle. When that huge buck appears before you, you don't want to break out your smartphone and start making calculations!

Before you go out to shoot at longer ranges, learn to shoot at a 100 yards. A 4" group on the range at 100 yards is a 12" group at 300, and that's without adrenaline and some hard breathing. Only when you can consistently shoot four-shot 1" groups at a 100 yards, are you ready to consider longer range shots. We owe it to any animal we shoot at to

kill it cleanly, so time on a range and practise are crucial. Remember, good technique comes from practical experience.

If you are going to use all the technical aids available, read the manual, so that you understand how it works and take the time to set it up properly and again, practise on a range. When you can consistently shoot 4" groups on the range at 300 yards, you can start to think about longer shots in the real world.

In conclusion, spend as much as you can on optics and then a bit more. If your budget is tight, buy a fixed power premium scope – a 7x50 or 8x56. You can often pick up a second-hand bargain on the gun sales websites. But don't compromise on quality and

buy something which looks “tacticool” but will not live up to your expectations.

If you can afford to spend a bit more, go for a variable power scope with an illuminated reticle. If you want to push the boat out, then a ballistic turret is worth having but only if you are prepared to put the range time in and learn to use it – it definitely does NOT give you the ability to take longer shots, so be prepared to burn some ammo. On the other hand, you could just stick to shots under 200 yards and spend time honing your stalking skills.




STALKING



IMPROVING THE ODDS

If you are going to stalk live quarry, it is your responsibility to ensure that your marksmanship is up to the job, says Paul Hill.

PHOTOGRAPHY: TWEED MEDIA



Over the past decade or so, firearms ownership in the UK has undergone something of a renaissance, with sporting rifles leading the way, in particular the ownership of centrefire rifles for deer stalking. Seldom does a week go by without someone emailing or phoning me to find out how they can get into deer stalking.

As sportsmen and women, we should never underestimate the importance of becoming proficient, regardless of the sport we choose. In shooting sports, this is even more important when we are taking the life of an animal; it is our responsibility to do that as cleanly and humanely as possible.

How many game shooters put away their guns at the end of the season, lamenting on a season passed until the leaves once again drop and the shotgun is dusted off? Of course, there may be the odd charity clay shoot, but, by and large, a good number of game shooters won't touch their guns until the first day of the season and will just pray that things go well. In this respect, stalkers are no different.

In the UK, deer have no natural predators, but that doesn't mean that their survival instinct has been dulled in any way. Their first and most natural reaction to a threat is the flight mechanism. In addition, the ability of a deer to survive an injury that would prove almost

instantly fatal to a human is staggering. Even a fatally wounded animal can run a considerable distance before expiring. From this it is clear that the most important aspect of the stalk is shot placement: to try and ensure the quickest and cleanest kill possible. Practice is vital. But how can we make sure any practice we undertake will benefit us in the field?

Whilst clay-shooting grounds proliferate, it is a sad reality that rifle ranges, where effective practice can take place, do not. Those ranges that are available are mostly only suitable for zeroing and load development, and don't offer the flexibility needed for useful practice. And finding a range where you can shoot from all the most practical positions on realistic targets can be a task in itself.

Of course, many stalkers have land over which to shoot where they could also practice, but we have to take noise into consideration, and few landowners enjoy the barrage of shots likely to be needed, let alone the general public and perhaps even the authorities. A couple of shots to check zero is not practice. Practicing on your own may also ingrain any problems or bad habits without realising it. An hour with a coach or instructor can be worth countless hours searching internet forums for advice from the many stalkers with years of experience gained from the comfort of their armchairs.

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Having established a need for practice, and assuming that a suitable range has been found, we need to make sure that the scenarios we are likely to encounter in the field are catered for at the range. Is there a high seat to practice from? Is it possible to shoot from several different positions such as sitting, kneeling and standing? Just as importantly, is there a coach or instructor on-hand to offer assistance and guidance?

Let's assume that you've found a range that can offer everything you need. Zero has been checked and any adjustments made, and you have decided to shoot from a standing position using sticks as a support, a very common situation in the field, but one few stalkers practice. There is little point just having a few shots to check that you can hit the target in the required spot two or three times. On an average training visit I would expect a visiting shooter to take anywhere up to 50 shots from different positions as well as distances. This isn't a numbers game like breaking clays; it is effective and meaningful practice to enable the shooter to confidently take an accurate shot when presented. When you have to make a pressurised shot in the field, you shouldn't have to think about it, it should come naturally.

To a novice, this could mean a number of visits, as learning to use a centrefire rifle safely and effectively takes time. Before I take potential clients out for their first deer, I would expect them to visit around three or four times, as

much for their own confidence as mine. Whilst there are many rifle shooters happy to punch paper from a bench or a prone position, a deerstalker should be able to adapt and shoot competently from several positions, consistently. And whilst nobody is perfect, regular and useful practice will reduce the potential for disaster – it's not how good the good shots are, it's how bad the bad ones are!

Lastly, before you visit a range, try to give some thought as to what you may want to achieve and your own capabilities. There is no point trying to shoot targets a long way away unless they are just that, targets. The vast majority of deer in the UK are shot at less than 100 yards and, as that distance increases, the chances of wounding increases. Modern equipment such as high magnification optics and rangefinders unfortunately give stalkers false expectations, and whilst a joy to own and use, should not replace fieldcraft.

Each individual is unique in his or her requirements and skills. Whilst the desire to stalk deer is high, we should never underestimate the importance of practice beforehand. And I am not just referring to familiarising yourself with your rifle, scope and the ballistics and bullet performance of your chosen calibre, but also what we intend to do and how to do it. That way, when we eventually settle the crosshairs on an animal, we can be confident that the time we spent on the range was not wasted.



GOOD PRACTICE

1. Find a range or land that offers flexibility and suitability for your needs.
2. Go prepared. Take enough ammunition, ear defenders and shooting aids.
3. Make your practice sessions as relevant as possible. It is all very well shooting from a bench or prone, but if you want to improve your proficiency as a deer stalker, ensure that you practice from positions you are likely to use in the field (kneeling, sitting, freehand and from sticks).
4. Don't be afraid to ask for guidance.
5. Know your limits and never take a shot at a deer that is beyond your capability.

Paul Hill has been involved in shooting and deer stalking for 35 years. In addition to being a professional stalker and running Corinium Rifle Range in Wiltshire, he also conducts DSC1 courses, is a BASC approved trainer and specialises in firearms awareness and training and carcass handling and butchery. He is also an approved witness for the DSC2.
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BIG GAME HUNTING

HARD LESSONS

Thorough preparation, attention to detail and a cool head are vital when it comes to making the right decisions in the hunting field, says professional hunter Hans Vermaak.

Africa runs deep in my veins; my family settled here in the late 1600s and, like my forefathers before me, I grew up with a rifle in my hand. Following in my father's footsteps, I have spent my entire working life as a professional hunter.

Indeed, the African bush has been my classroom from a

very young age and if there is one thing I have learnt along the way, it is that there are certain things that no books can teach you. In hunting, there is no substitute for practical, hands-on experience, and preparation and attention to detail are everything.


I was 13 years old; my father had sent me out into the bush to shoot an impala for the pot and I was justifiably excited. The bachelor herd were no more than 120 yards in front of me and I could feel my heart pounding as I settled the crosshairs on the neck of the nearest ram. Just as I had been taught by my father, I gradually squeezed the trigger until the rifle barked, almost taking me by surprise.

I couldn't believe my eyes, then, when the impala didn't even flinch at the shot. I reloaded and fired again, this time yanking at the trigger in haste. The impala bucked, a clear sign that he'd been hit. As he darted off, I fired again

in panic, desperate to knock him down. I heard the sharp crack of the bullet tearing through grass and brush, instead of the deep thump of muscle – I had missed again. I began the slow process of following-up the wounded animal. The blood was visible, but it was watery and there was just the odd fleck every few meters.

As I stepped out of a thicket, I spotted the impala about 80 yards away, clearly distressed but more than capable of fleeing. He saw me, turned and was just about to break into a run when I swung the crosshairs onto his rump (my dad was not going to be impressed, the meat would be ruined) and fired. To my relief, he went down in the waist-high grass. I approached the fallen animal and got into position for a final coup de grâce to end the misery. God I felt awful. But, unbeknownst to me, things were about to get much worse.

I squeezed the trigger and,



**“COMMON SENSE IS IMPORTANT
IN ALL ASPECTS OF HUNTING,
BUT NONE MORE SO THAN
WHEN SELECTING A RIFLE FOR
DANGEROUS GAME.”**

to my absolute dismay, the rifle went ‘click’. Five yards in front of me the poor animal struggled, occasionally looking at me with big, dark, terrified eyes. I felt for my ammo pouch – it wasn’t there. I checked the magazine again and it was definitely empty. My heart sank. Then with a surge of relief I remembered my knife. I felt for my sheath on my belt, and it wasn’t there either. I felt helpless and the guilt was overwhelming. I was all alone, on foot, far from the homestead and I had nothing I could use to put this poor animal out of its misery. I sat down and I started sobbing. I then realized how futile and pathetic that was – I had to do something.

I searched the area for a rock, any hard object would do – I was desperate. Needless to say I found what I needed and did what I had to do, but as I dragged that animal back home, I was heartbroken and deeply ashamed.

This event has haunted me since that day, but it taught me a number of invaluable lessons.

Always check your rifle’s accuracy with a few shots on a target each and every time you go hunting, and ensure you always use the same ammunition in the field that you used on the range (I later discovered that I had used a lighter bullet from a different manufacturer). Never head to the hills without more than enough



ammunition. If you think you need 10 rounds, take 20. Always ensure you are properly kitted with a sharp knife, water and any other items that will ensure a trouble-free hunt. It is grossly disrespectful to your quarry to be unprepared. These days, when I head off on a stalk with a client, I remember that impala’s ordeal and I double-check my gear and that of my client. It will never happen again.

Common sense is important in all aspects of hunting, but none more so than when choosing a rifle for dangerous game. Once you have decided on a calibre and rifle, it is your responsibility to practice until you are completely competent with it. Dangerous game hunting isn’t for Rambos – it’s for experienced hunters who are well prepared and ready for the ultimate challenge.

**“... AS I DRAGGED THAT ANIMAL
BACK HOME, I WAS HEARTBROKEN
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BIG GAME HUNTING



“THE LIONS WERE SERIOUSLY CLOSE, THEIR BREATHING WAS CLEARLY AUDIBLE IN THE AIR.”

I could see the flickering of the campfire through the gauze of my tent window and knew that Coostics (nickname for a lad named Marcus), the camp manager and apprentice PH, would soon be on his way with a steaming cup of strong coffee. The morning air was fresh as there had been one of those classic African thunderstorms during the night, and I was concerned that our scent drag to the lion bait would have been ruined by the rain. It was 3:30am and I already had butterflies in my stomach. In 30 minutes' time, my client and I would be entering a rickety blind in complete darkness to wait for first light, when we hoped to find lions near our freshly hung bait. We had hastily built the blind the previous afternoon, 45 yards from where our zebra bait was tethered to a tree. I knew the blind wasn't brilliant but it was the best we could manage in the limited time we had before nightfall. I also knew that two very large lions had headed into the valley the previous day, so our expectations were high,

which only added to the tension as we crept into the blind under the cover of darkness.

Suddenly, in the inky darkness, a lion started to roar, and then, a moment later, he was joined by his companion. The sound of the deep guttural moans and grunts increased in intensity and built to a crescendo, reverberating and echoing through the entire valley. In total darkness and behind a flimsy blind, it was like nothing I had experienced before. At no more than 50 yards away, and with no birdsong or even a breath of wind, it was chilling. Suddenly it went deathly quiet, allowing us time to catch our breaths.

I could hear footsteps in the muddy ground, a squelching sound that grew louder and louder. I was willing daylight to arrive – this wasn't part of the plan. The lions were seriously close, their breathing was clearly audible in the heavy air and they were on my side of the blind. I firmly squeezed down onto my client's knee with my left hand, urging him not to move or breathe. I froze, rifle held between

my legs with the butt resting on the ground – it was loaded and ready to go. The lions stopped dead and I sensed that they were suddenly aware of our presence. It was deathly quiet, pitch-black and it was as if time stood still. A loud grunt followed by the sound of something big flopping over. I could hear their breathing again, and I guessed that the lions had concluded that all was well and they had laid down to rest nearby. More heavy breathing, snorts and grunts of content, and my heart started beating again.

Then they started to roar once again. This time they were no more than 15 feet from the blind, and I was certain I could feel the earth shuddering. 'God, I wish I had built a better blind,' I thought to myself. The lion's roars subsided and silence fell over the valley once again. I stopped breathing.

Crash! To my horror I realised that the acacia branch which we had stuffed into the doorway of

the blind had lost its purchase and rolled away. Daylight was slowly displacing the darkness, but not fast enough. The lions, startled by the bush falling over, had sprung to their feet and were now facing the blind. One lion took a few steps towards the now open doorway as I turned and aimed my .458 Lott at the gaping hole in the blind. I knew that if the lion saw us in the dark at that range (4ft) one of two things would happen: he would take flight or turn and fight. I was prepared for the latter. The hunting gods were smiling upon us that morning because the lion stopped within just a foot of the blind, sniffed the bush and turned away. They then strode towards the bait, shoulder to shoulder, brothers in arms, supreme masters of their universe. Light began to flood into the valley as the sun rose between the horizon and the low clouds. I watched as they walked away from the blind towards the bait.

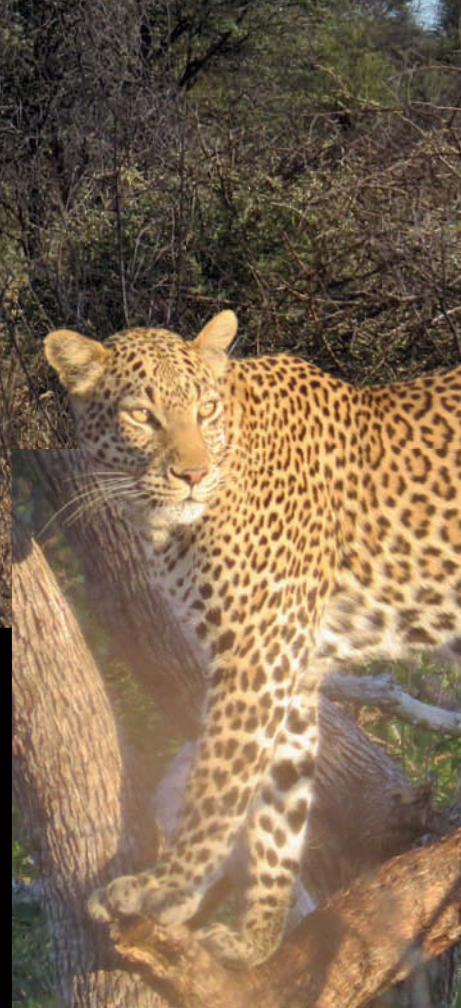
Peter had his rifle firmly on the



rest, waiting for the opportunity to take his shot. As the lions reached the bait, the larger and more dominant of the two reared up onto his back legs, broadside to us, and began tearing at the zebra rump that had been shredded during the night. Peter indicated that he had a clear shot and I urged him to take it. The .470 exploded and the lion was bowled over, but, in a flash, he was back up, growling and biting at the pain, spinning in circles and, before we could comprehend what was happening, he had disappeared into the bush. Silence. It was 5:20am.

This was one of the longest, most intense days I have ever spent as a hunter. Not a situation that anyone wants to be in. The follow-up is not part of this story, but suffice to say that it was an ordeal. Just after 5pm that evening, we finally finished off the lion, we had been on his trail for 12 nerve-racking hours.

I learnt a lot from this experience. Firstly, certain things should never be rushed. Whether you are building a blind for pigeon decoying or for leopard or lion hunting, it should be done properly and with careful consideration. Had that lion popped his head into



the doorway, who knows what would have happened.

When your nerves have been tested, it is absolutely crucial that you regroup and assess the situation with a clear head. I should never have allowed Peter to take a shot when the lion was at full stretch, standing on his back legs, forelegs extended. Because the lion was grappling with the bait, it was unstable and could quite easily have moved just as the shot was taken. In addition, the vital organs on a lion are behind the shoulder and the heart is positioned quite low. But when a lion is at full stretch, it is much more difficult to judge the correct point of aim.

Allowing Peter to take the shot when he did was a bad call and I should have been patient enough to wait it out. Those lions weren't going anywhere. If I had only waited a few more minutes, we would have had better light and the perfect opportunity at a broadside shot.

There is, however, another aspect of preparation and weapon choice that must be touched upon.

Peter insisted on using an open-sighted .470 Nitro Express which he was emotionally attached to. At the shooting range, his precision was average and I was concerned about his ability to place a good shot on a lion in a pressurised situation. I did raise my concerns with him and suggested that he use his old faithful .375 H&H which had a scope. But he was a wealthy and powerful businessman, a very experienced hunter, and I was a young and eager to please PH, so I went with it. But I knew in my gut that this wasn't the right decision.

Several days prior to our lion incident, Peter and I had leopard-crawled to within 30 yards of a sleeping male lion in the midday heat. We were perfectly obscured by a small fallen acacia and he was able to rest his rifle on the trunk which was low enough to allow him to rest his elbows on the soft ground – an ideal set-up. After about 20 minutes the lions stood up to stretch and move to a shadier spot, presenting us with a perfect broadside shot. Peter's safety was already off so it was just a question of squeezing off the shot when he was ready. The .470 thundered and the lion merely reacted to the sound of the shot. Peter had missed by miles. This is when I should have drawn a line in the sand and insisted that he use his scoped .375.

It simply does not make sense

to use a weapon you are not competent with. Bigger is not necessarily better and the first shot is the one that really counts.

I am 43 years old now, I have been guiding clients for just over 20 years, and these days I won't mince my words when crucial decisions need to be made to ensure the safety of the entire hunting party or the wellbeing of an animal. Making the right decision will increase the odds that the kill is clean and the hunt is a success.

Indeed, thorough and meticulous preparation, attention to detail and a cool head are vital when it comes to making the right decisions in the hunting field.

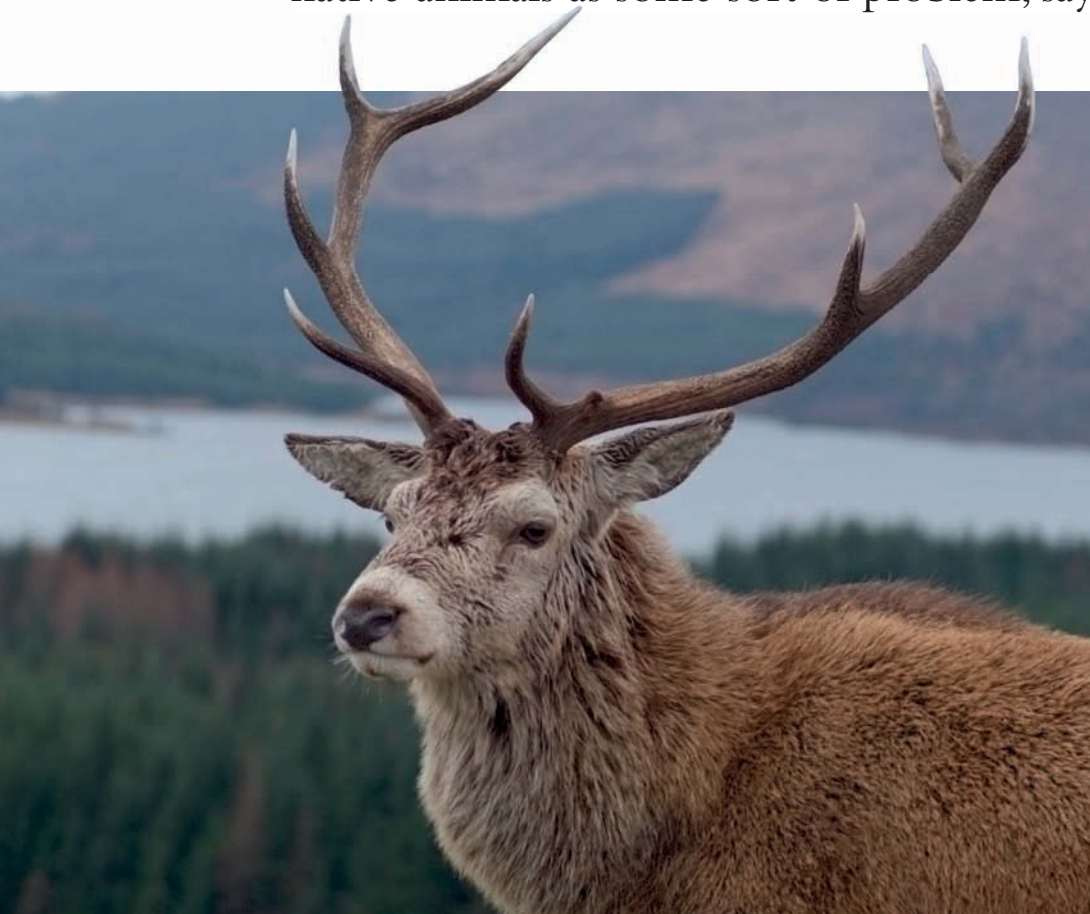
Hans Vermaak is the managing director of Coenraad Vermaak Safaris, one of the longest established and most highly regarded hunting outfitters in Southern Africa. He has over 20 years experience as a PH. www.cvsafaris.co.za

“HAD THAT LION POPPED HIS HEAD INTO THE DOORWAY, WHO KNOWS WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED.”



WHERE HAS THE MONARCH GONE?

Surely, one day, policies on deer must recoil from treating these great native animals as some sort of problem, says Michael Wigan.



For those adhering to traditional seasons, the last shot of the 2014 season was fired at stags on October 20. Weather was mild and the rut was drawn-out. After a benign Highland summer, stag weights were good. Venison prices will not have entranced deer forest owners and stalkers – down on last year. Some dealers set a lower price when the pound was riding high; it fell shortly afterwards, potentially improving their 2014 profits.

Scottish red stag stalking is now on a definite trend. Two factors have set this. One is the resurgence of grouse moor success on what was formerly deer range, the other is the effect on stag numbers of Forest Enterprise (FES), the government's forestry arm.

FES accounted for about 30 per cent of the Scottish deer cull in 2014. In the previous year, they killed 43 per cent of the total roe and 21 per cent of the red deer cull. For a body indirectly involved in stalking, this is startlingly high.

Let us look at this more closely. Last year, forest rangers culled nearly half the FES total. Contractors – the people about whom stalkers frequently feel incensed, partly because the bounty rates are reputedly £100 an animal of whatever size, encouraging reckless and opportunistic killing – shot another 40 per cent. Recreational stalkers, who better appreciate the target animal, shot only 11 per cent. So some 25,000 Scottish deer are being shot as a cull, or as waste product. The rest are shot for sport, creating employment, a sporting challenge and healthy exercise, in addition to a financial return. Stalking in Scotland is worth £105 million.

Opinions may vary about whether the FES role in national deer management is right. One thing for sure is that in Continental countries and Scandinavia, where there is a more reverential attitude towards forest deer, it would be regarded as wasteful, even barbaric.

Behind the problem is a failure in forestry policy going back a long time. Plantations were established from which deer were fenced out. Deer were classed as vermin, enemies in the forest scene, little different from rats on islands with ground-nesting birds. Rides were left, if at all, for the movement of trees, rather than for occupation by deer. No shrubs were planted on which deer could browse, glades were not left where they could be seen and stalked for sport, burns were planted to the edges.

Contemporary forest planting is better designed. Far better. But the motivation for that is landscape and biodiversity value, rather than deer management value. The easier management of deer which will benefit forest rangers in the future is a coincidence.

Deer range is shrinking on Scotland's open hills. This has gone unnoticed. Grouse moors are enjoying a brilliant and exciting recovery. That has meant that deep-pocketed landholders have focussed on providing this thrilling form of winged-game shooting to the exclusion of other moorland pursuits. Usually this has meant the removal of deer because they are carriers of ticks, lethal blood-suckers and infection-vectors for grouse.

Again unnoticed, partly because conservation groups' publicity and fund-raising departments are so behind the curve. The tide is turning. We are now moving away from grouse monoculture triumphalism.

Forward-looking grouse moor managers have proved that they can guarantee good bags in high numbers, but they have become conscious of public concern that the hills are being denuded of other species in order to do it. Hares, which at one time were exterminated as tick carriers also, are now present on some excellent grouse moors. The return of red deer may take longer.

In the Cairngorms, one deer management group covers a quarter of a million acres. Despite being situated in the heartland of what was legendary stalking country, there is not a single commercial stag-stalking enterprise there today. What is not grouse moor is forestry, and the balance is conservation ground where deer are unwelcome.

The new reality of Scottish deer is that they have burgeoned in suburbia and on farms, and have simultaneously been thinned right down on much open hill and mountain range. Often, where grouse moor managers have not evicted them, forest regeneration enthusiasts have killed them off because they browse saplings. Eschewing fencing – the rational method of managing browsing – re-wilding managers have resorted to the last resort as a first response.

In all this, some ecological truths have been long forgotten. Time will bring them round again, but for the moment, red deer are seen purely as an environmental enemy. It is tragic that this blinkered ignorance goes unchallenged.

Consider just a few points. In April, deer forest land is littered with dropped or 'cast' antlers. By August, they are gone. Where? Some are picked by walkers and stalkers and used or sold. The rest are in the food-chain of small rodents and other herbivores. Deer eat their

own antlers, and field voles and their kind eat the rest. They need the calcium. Antlers feed not only the ground – one reason old stalkers used to fling unwanted front legs over the hill – but other species, too.

Cast your mind a short way back to the hard winters of 2010 and 2011. Where I live in Sutherland, deer carcasses littered the ground, starved to death. Each west-facing corrie contained its sad pile of mouldering carcasses. Well, what happens when an animal dies far away and cannot be buried? Same with sheep as for deer: the worm-fed ground greens up, fed by the minerals in that carcass. Deer enrich soil with the skeletons and with their skins.

Their browsing is valuable, too. Seen only as having harmful impacts on rare plants, deer

“The red deer is not an alien intruder. It was here before we were.”



in fact frequently strengthen those plants by browsing off the tops. Deer eat different plants from sheep; tussock for example, and they eat them at a different time of day. Coming down low at dusk, they rest up on lower ground, enriching it with their droppings and mowing it with their mouths. In hard winters they crop heather shoots to extract minimum feed value. I have seen hinds and their calves in hard winters browse blaeberry plants right to the roots to get vitamin succour. Those plants look healthy enough now. The same is true of whin-bushes and gorse.

If you are walking the moors on deer range, follow their trot-paths. If the place is well-managed, these are not highly visible, less than a foot wide. From these trots you will view the landscape better. Deer behaviour is still largely explained by fear of predation and needing the widest visual panorama in front of them. Sight and scent keep them out of harm's way.

One day, policies on deer will recoil from treating these great native animals as some sort of problem. The actual problem lies with the perception, dopey repetition of a lot of fashionable whimsy about habitat and biodiversity, tilted by ideologues against animals which have a sporting value. Land management needs balance, based on wise use.

It was, once upon a time, forest policy to slice down the oaks on Loch Ness to make way for spruce and fir. That was thought intelligent. There followed the encouragement of planting fast-growing Canadian softwoods on peat bogs, a policy now arousing bemused abhorrence and requiring eye-wateringly expensive reparation.

The sporting crowd could be equally swivel-eyed. They abhorred sheep and de-stocked the hills. Now the woolly flocks are back, controlling heather and getting rid of ticks which harm not only grouse but people.

The red deer is not an alien intruder. It was here before we were. Then, early man subsisted on it. Today, venison sales have risen 400 per cent in one year. The appetite for deer meat has re-awoken. At the same time, the red stag is the public's favourite wild animal.

Public policy, too often skewed by powerful lobby groups, too often the last to wake up, should respect the creature that provides that great meat and, simultaneously, a valuable modification of our environment.

ON THE SHOOT



GREYS GALORE

Mike Barnes savours a day on an award-winning shoot in Bedfordshire.

PHOTOGRAPHY: BOB ATKINS

So who are the winners of the Purdey Awards, and what happens when the fanfare starts to fade?

We need look no further than 2011 winner Simon Maudlin, who continues to take forward the 800-acre family farm shoot at Caldecote, near Biggleswade, in impressive fashion.

Although 2014 will go down as a year where, generally, many grey partridge projects across the country have disappointed, the

Caldecote count was just over 300 on the 681-acre project area. And yet the farm looks little different to others in the area where there are little or no partridges of any sort – some are barren of wild game altogether. In any event, Bedfordshire is not a county where one would expect otherwise.

Simon explains: “The shoot was formed in the 1960s. The farm was at the time, like others in the area, very much a market garden operation, delivering vegetables to

London, by train from Biggleswade. In earlier times, the trains brought back horse manure from the streets of the capital, which of course was a tonic for the farms – great for vegetable growing!

But then horse power gave way to the infernal combustion engine and, in time, supermarkets gatecrashed the party and with their global buying power there was no longer a demand, or need, for market gardens, which were actually great for wild game – the

lettuce beds were a haven for greys.

But Peter Maudlin (Simon’s father) was passionate about grey partridges and did what he could until Simon eventually took over. A voluntary gamekeeper did a top job but reached a point where he was ready to step down and along came Melvin Wright who, like Simon, had taken part in a gamekeeper’s course at Sparsholt College. Both returned inspired by the experience. Simon says he feels his passion for grey partridges ➡



What a grand finale!
The final drive of the day and the
spectacular sight of greys galore

ON THE SHOOT



A family affair... Simon (centre) with (from left) sister Caroline, brother Ben & his son Charlie, brother Richard & his wife Belinda

comes down to the fact that 1976, the last great partridge year, was the year he was born!

Melvin's particular talent is for the trapping of vermin, to help the resident game but also a range of other bird species. Simon, meanwhile, is joint farm manager – so it's a perfect combination. He has no doubt that the key to having successful wild greys is two-fold: "Taking care of your margins and keeping on top of vermin."

Their success is all the more impressive in view of the fact that Simon runs the farm with brother Richard, while Melvin is a full-time electrical contractor. Vermin control, therefore, takes place early every morning and after work in the evening – he is passionate about wildlife and also very knowledgeable.

There is little arguing with Simon's success with ELS since entering a scheme in 2006, and he has high expectations for the HLS which he entered last summer. A whole range of farmland birds have flourished. Simon told me: "A couple of bird watchers were out on the farm recently and were amazed at what they saw. The first

thing they said was 'you must have over 100 grey partridges on these fields'. I replied: '301 actually'." A number of bird watchers visit.

The counts weren't wrong. I have seen the birds in the air – and like all others who are confronted with driven greys, I found them mesmerising. I had the great good fortune to be invited to shoot at Caldecote. The date was December 6. "This particular date was always my father's day," explains Simon, "and his guests are still taking part. Unfortunately, my father is no longer with us, but we always try and make this day special." And so it was.



Clive Bates enjoying his 51st season at Caldecote

I was deeply honoured to be in the team for the day. The forecast was sunshine, blue skies and a soft breeze. Yes, I know what readers are thinking... but it would be great for photographs. So I booked photographer Bob Atkins, and arranged to meet at 7am at the *Fieldsports* offices.

So began a memorable day. The A1 was kind and we found the farm easily and in good time. The shoot room is in the middle of the farm – there to meet me with "coffee?" were Simon, Melvin and two or three of the Guns.

Photos on the shoot room wall tell their own story – a very happy

one. I chatted with 78-year-old Clive Bates, a great friend of Simon's father, who was enjoying his 51st year at Caldecote. He was able to share much of the history of the shoot. It was apparent from this conversation and others that there is great respect for the Maudlin family. "Peter was like the Pied Piper – children followed him everywhere, and he brought lots of youngsters into the sport," said Clive. The family have also been key in the village, having excellent sport facilities.

Soon enough we were all gathered and paying full attention to Simon giving a rundown of the day ahead. There would be five drives, and we were shooting pheasants, redleg partridges, grey partridges, and the usual various. Simon urged the Guns not to shoot at pigeons until the first shots had been fired at game. The wild birds are very jumpy. And yes, feel free to shoot greys. Firstly, there was a very good count – also, it would be likely that not many would be shot (see later!).

I drew No. 8. Shortly after, we made our way to the shoot trailer, full of animated chat. I was pegged next to Clive, who was to keep me up to speed throughout. On reaching my peg I could see I would be looking straight into the sun, and in front to my left were ➡



Never any shortage of beaters and pickers-up. None expect payment, but everyone involved sits down to a delicious three-course meal at the end of the day, cooked by the boys' mother Josie and served by the girls

“The first thing they
said was ‘you must
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fields’. I replied:
‘301 actually’.”

Another covey of greys makes
for the end of the line

ON THE SHOOT

some trees. We were warned that there could be some greys on the drive, but they were a step ahead of most of us. A lot of pigeons swirled into view, and then shots were fired. Somewhat blinded by the light, I was slow to grasp that not all the birds were woodpigeons. Then I heard that wonderful chattering as a covey of about a dozen burst through the line – unscathed! I didn't even get a shot off. There was an impressive show of game so I took some comfort in a brace of pheasants and three redlegs that I managed to catch up with – giving some pleasure to my ever-doting lab, Cara.

A super day's sport ensued. A remarkable mix of pheasants and redlegs (mostly reared, but a decent stock of wild) throughout. Money from the Purdey Awards had been used to improve and enlarge the rearing operation, creating more space for the birds. Given the conditions, they flew brilliantly.

Elevenes were after the

second drive, and we then had some substantial snacks after an excellent fourth drive, which had seen several greys flying in every direction but the one desired for snapper Bob. But then, suddenly, a covey of eight or nine appeared to my right. This is it, a right and left, surely? Keep cool. I could see buildings behind me and also people, but my shot was safe. It was also accurate. A touch of panic followed as I threw the gun at the second bird – and missed. Blast! The blow was softened by it being an excellent drive.

Then to the final drive, Pada. "There should be a few greys here," smiled our host.

Bob informed me that he had some good shots in the bag (translated, that means he has some great stuff). He had thus far not been in the right place at the right time for the greys, but was pointed in the direction of some likely escape routes, and so headed for one of them, Nikons at the ready.

The ground was open stubbles, rising slightly in front of the line, where there was a long strip of maize. Still a clear blue sky. The sense of anticipation was immense, exaggerating the longish wait as Simon and his beating line brought in a large swathe of ground. Eventually, some pheasants and a redleg, then a brace of greys. And then... an explosion, a classic starburst of greys in every direction, all seemingly singing. Most of the line had shots, but only Robert Capon managed a right and left. I had one speculative shot – missed! There must have been 50 or so in the air, a good portion of which appear in the photographs that accompany this article – a merging together of possibly four coveys. A further 10-strong had passed through the other end of the line earlier in the drive.

Simon blew the whistle with 50 yards of cover to go. That's enough. It really was quite sensational and more would not have made it



better. And yet, despite what we had seen during this wonderful day, just seven greys had been shot. Their numbers, the mesmerising weaving flight, the buzz of excitement – it's a whole different game to redlegs.

All of this on a self-help basis – no paid staff or helpers. Little wonder they struck gold in the Purdey Awards.

BAG:

97 pheasants, 45 redlegs, 7 grey partridges, 1 jay. Total: 150



There was a team of nine Guns: Philip Shaw (retired farmer from Beds/Herts border), Peter Shaw (Tetworth Hall), Robert Capon (neighbouring farmer, Broom), Chris Jones (farmer, Clophill), Chris Hall (neighbouring farmer, Moggerhanger), Alec Bates (farmer, Honeydon), Clive Bates (farmer, Tadlow), Neil Croft (farmer and cousin, Great Barford) & Mike Barnes (Fieldsports)

UNFORGETTABLE?

With one month to go at the time of writing, Phil Burtt is three quarters of the way through what has proved to be a memorable season at Belvoir Castle.

It has been a brilliant year for partridges – they seem to have gone on and on – we were shooting them into December on drives that still seemed full to the brim. And these are birds which were released well before the start of the season, which most likely is the reason they have fared so well.

They are strong and fit, and have flown magnificently.

Likewise, we have also released some Spanish birds, which have been a revelation.

This means that on completion of 97 days, we can concentrate our thoughts on pheasants in January. This is the secret of

success for any commercial shoot. Make sure the bags are shot before Christmas, which really takes the pressure off for the last month of the season.

However, let no-one make the assumption that a lot of money is being made – with a typical percentage return on game released, breaking even is perhaps the only realistic ambition. Like many others, we run the shoot as it is our love, and with Belvoir it helps raise the profile of the castle. It is also good to be working so closely with the Belvoir Hunt.

If the estate was smaller, then perhaps things would be different. At Brandon (my old shoot between Grantham and Newark), we enjoyed a 60 per cent return, year on year.

It is also important to properly look after visitors. Yes, deliver good quality shooting – that's a given – but pay equal attention to food and (if required) accommodation. We have had teams from around the world – USA, Finland, Russia and Canada. All have praised the accommodation on offer, both at the castle and Croxton Park Lodge. I am sure this can be a deciding factor on repeat bookings.

I suspect that this is a season which we will never forget. It started with bumper numbers of grouse and many records being broken. Then came some tremendous partridge shooting. Admittedly, it was not as good for grey partridges as we had hoped – but they at least held their numbers. Redlegs enjoyed a really good rearing programme, with a near

perfect summer, and the same applies also for pheasants. Disease problems never really reared their ugly heads, with just a few localised outbreaks. To match this, there was a strong demand for let days – indeed, while I can't speak for

other shoots, our bookings are already looking strong for next season.

There have been many great days' sport, though most shoots will have experienced the odd day when birds have been reluctant to fly, due, I believe, to unusual levels of air pressure. But this only served to underscore the need for all Guns to understand that we are dealing with nature and not clay pigeons.

One person I know shot two days back-to-back in Wales – spectacular high fliers on the first day, reluctant fliers on the second. But this happens all over the country – thankfully on only two or three days a year. Over a season, it all balances out and we also had some spectacularly windy days when Guns were tested to the limit.

All in all, the season leaves me in a very optimistic mood. The sport is in buoyant shape, continuing to attract people from all walks of life. Here at Belvoir we have seen actors, singers, racing car drivers, lawyers, accountants, builders... the list is endless. But we all have one thing in common – a love of the sport.

“... this only served to underscore the need for all Guns to understand that we are dealing with nature and not clay pigeons.”



12-20 HIGHLIGHT

For me, one of the highlights of the season is the annual Belvoir Fieldsports 12-20 Club Christmas Shoot.

A fantastic day, held courtesy of the Duke and Duchess of Rutland, in which 20 youngsters were split into three teams, taking it in turns to spend two drives with the beaters, two with the pickers-up and two shooting in the line. In this way, they get a full picture of what goes into putting on a day's driven shooting.

The day in question, December 22, was one of the windiest (if not the windiest!) of the year. But they coped brilliantly. It was a happy day for all – not forgetting the parents watching on.



GETTING YOUR HEAD INTO THE GAME

In order to shoot well, you have to be in the right frame of mind, says Simon Ward. And the key to achieving that lies in the preparation.



It's the first drive of the day and you are pegged right out in the open, in full view of your fellow Guns. Feeling very exposed, you are suddenly overcome with nerves and find yourself praying that the first bird of the day, the one everyone will inevitably be watching, doesn't come your way. But it does. Getting up from a long way off, it makes a beeline straight towards your peg. Even though it isn't a particularly challenging bird, you just know you are going to miss it. And, of course, you do. But why?

The fact is, you were defeated by that bird before you even mounted your gun. And the root cause, you may be surprised to learn, almost certainly wasn't poor technique, but poor preparation. Getting into the right mindset is key, but it doesn't happen by accident – you have to work at it.

Everybody is different. Some people love the pressure of the big stage and others shy away from it. But even the very best Shots get nervous – it's just how they deal with those nerves that sets them apart. It's like an actor who is about

to step onto the stage – they have learnt to control their nerves or they would freeze and be unable to deliver their next line.

Given the choice, I would always choose for the first bird of the day to come my way. Not because I want to be the centre of attention, but because I want to overcome that barrier as soon as possible and get my day off to a positive start. If you think you are going to miss, you almost certainly will. Luckily, there is a lot that you can do before you get to your peg to improve your odds of succeeding.



THE IMPORTANCE OF VISUALISATION

A couple of weeks before you go shooting you should start to visualise how you want the day to go. Picture the topography, the layout of the drives and how the birds are likely to fly, and mentally go through the techniques you know you will need. So when you turn up on the day, you will have done your homework and will already be feeling well prepared and ready. Crucially, you will also be in a positive frame of mind.

Once you get to your peg, before the drive starts, use further visualisation techniques to prepare yourself for what is to come. Even if you have never shot a specific drive before, you can usually ascertain where the birds will come from and how they are likely to fly.

Next, mount your empty gun and practise a few imaginary shots – a few to the left, a few to the right and a few straight driven. You should actually picture the birds in the sky and how they may be affected by a prevailing wind. I do this before the start of every drive and, for me, this is an important part of my preparation. Not only will this warm your muscles and stop you from getting stiff and cold before the drive has even begun, but it builds on the muscle memory you will already have established through practice, preparing your body for what is to come. That way, you won't have to think about your feet, posture and technique during the drive and you will be able to focus on the task at hand.

Having this routine in place will also act as a trigger, switching your brain from a sociable, relaxed and convivial frame of mind to 'performance mode'.

In my opinion, to shoot well, you have got to be focussed and committed to the shot. One of the big things I have learnt to do is to quieten my mind when I am on the peg, to block out all external influences that could affect my enjoyment, allowing me to focus solely on the next bird.

You can't co-ordinate your muscles if you are tense, so if you have butterflies, you need to think about what is causing them and block that out. But, equally, there is a fine line between being relaxed and focused, and being too relaxed. If you are too relaxed, you won't commit properly to the shot. I always say to my clients that you need a pinch of malice – i.e. you

“Once you have got the basics right, you must learn to have faith in the method and focus on the bird.”

must really *want* to kill the bird. As you prepare to mount the gun you must have that desire in you. If you can channel that, it will just tighten your focus.

BUILDING MUSCLE MEMORY

When I teach someone to shoot, I also try to teach them to believe that they are going to succeed.

Obviously, gunfit, theory and technique are important – if your technique is flawed or if your gun doesn't fit, it is unlikely that you will shoot well – but, equally, you can get bogged down and become too preoccupied by the theory.

Once you have got the basics right, you must learn to have faith in the method and focus on the bird. It is all about building confidence and establishing the right trigger points so that when you see something, you

automatically know what to do; a bit like an actor on stage who may not be able to recite all of their lines in one go, but given certain prompts – such as a line from a fellow cast member – their next line comes naturally. This comes from practice – lots of it.

Many people will read about the technique and theory of their chosen sport but they won't go out and put that theory into practise. This is futile. The actor who hasn't rehearsed enough is going to come unstuck. In shooting, there is no point in trying something new or different on a shoot day, because if you are thinking about your technique, you won't be focussed on the bird.

Establishing new techniques needs to be done beforehand, both on clays at a shooting ground and at home, in your back yard or in front of a mirror.

By simply practising the correct mount, swing and footwork with an empty gun at home, you will start to build that all-important muscle memory so that when you get to the peg, things will feel natural and well rehearsed. It's all about putting theory into practice through muscle memory.

MISSING IS A LEARNING CURVE

If you find that you are struggling with form – i.e. you are consistently missing a particular bird – you probably need to go back to the drawing board. There's no point in making the same mistake over and over.

In this instance, I would really recommend going to a seasoned game shooting instructor for a bit of fine-tuning. Until you know your own personal foibles – i.e. the things you, personally, tend to ➡



INSTRUCTION

do wrong – it is very difficult to make a self diagnosis; it could be one thing or it could be two or three things. An instructor will very quickly help you to get to the root of the problem.

All of the best Shots will know exactly where their weaknesses lie, what makes them tick and how their mind works. When they miss, they can work out what they did wrong. Indeed, in order to overcome the fear of failure, you must learn to see a miss as a lesson. You can brood about it, internalise it and beat yourself up about it, or you can see it as a learning curve, make amends, forget about the last bird and move onto the next one with a positive frame of mind.

The mental side of shooting is something that very few people spend much time thinking about – they don't have a plan B, a way of making amends when things go

awry, which they inevitably will from time to time. The ability to recover from a poor spell comes from experience and maintaining a positive frame of mind.

Gary Player, the golfer who famously coined the phrase 'the more I practise, the luckier I get', struggled with bunker shots. But, rather than taking the attitude that a good golfer won't end up in the sand, he spent hours chipping from a bunker until he became the best golfer in the world at it.

Shooting is no different. If you really want to improve your game and shoot well, you must do the same with your own bogey shots – practise them until you have mastered them and you no longer have to think about the theory and technique involved.

At the end of the day, you only get out of shooting what you are willing to put in.

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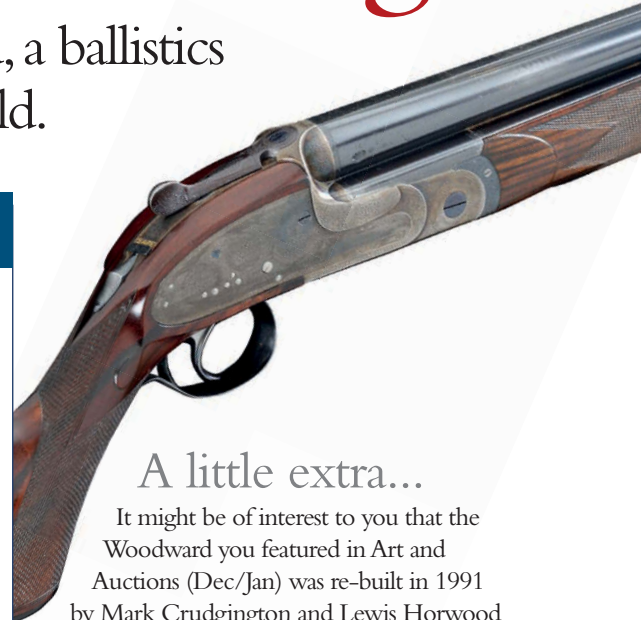


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From the mailbag...

Lessons for the inexperienced, a ballistics debate and diversity in the field.



THE WILLIAM POWELL LEADING LETTER

A point that needs addressing

Recently I was instructing/loading on a 400-bird day. My Gun (in fact all the Guns) were very inexperienced and confessed to having only shot clays (poorly) on two occasions.

Before the first drive I gave him a crash course on etiquette, safety, sporting birds, conduct etc. As the drive started and birds began to fly, I passed the loaded gun to my man who then proceeded to fire two barrels at pheasants in the next county.

"No Sir! I will point out suitable birds for you," I said. All to no avail. So I reloaded and didn't pass him the gun until birds began to come over us.

On the first drive, despite my best efforts and a considerable number of fantastic birds presented, none were addressed. The second drive had a very similar outcome and towards the end he said his arms and shoulders ached.

On the third drive he asked if I would shoot instead. I said I couldn't as it was not the done thing, and bad manners. He insisted, and I had a number of shots.

After the third drive I spoke with the agent and explained the situation. He said that if the Gun was happy for me to shoot, then so was he. He added that we required a bag for the cartridges shot and the quality of shooting was so poor, something needed to be done.

I shot the fourth drive and had a fabulous time. The bag was nearly achieved and, with the help of the loading team, cartridges were consumed.

My predicament is this: In my opinion, Guns should spend time having lessons and learning shoot etiquette before setting foot on a game shoot, out of courtesy to the keeper and beating line. I do not think it is correct for me to shoot another man's gun, his cartridges and birds for the host to pay for. I think it is rude.

This is happening often, and, although we can be cavalier and laugh about it, it is, in my opinion, very wrong.

Name withheld

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WILLIAM POWELL
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A little extra...

It might be of interest to you that the Woodward you featured in Art and Auctions (Dec/Jan) was re-built in 1991 by Mark Crudgington and Lewis Horwood whilst working for I. M. Crudgington Ltd in Bath. It was one of four best over-unders worked on for the same owner. Mark Crudgington later went on to invent a cross-over thumbhole stock for similar eye dominance conditions.

Shaun Caddy

An absence of diversity?

I thoroughly enjoy your publication. However, I must take issue with the unbelievable lack of diversity in your magazine. Does any person of colour shoot? Judging by your publication, the answer is a resounding no. Indeed, the lack of diversity within the shooting community is a fact beyond dispute. However, that fact does not obviate our responsibility to not only positively represent the sport but also to work to improve it. Indifference is not an option and does not justify the total absence of diversity in your magazine.

To quote your recent editorial, "One of the things I love about all country sports is the diverse mix of people you meet..." I respectfully submit that some of those people are people of colour and if you make the effort you will find them.

Let's show our sport in the best light. Thank you.

Leon Joseph Bechet



Supporting salmon

Lord James Percy is, as usual, right on target. His opinion piece in the Oct/Nov issue accurately details the numerous and overlapping causes for the disappearance of Atlantic salmon. Even more importantly, he enumerates some of the solutions. Some of these problems are so intractable ("... we can't control conditions at sea..."), politically infeasible or deeply embedded in human behaviour (the problem of externalities and the tragedy of the commons) that overcoming them will be remote.

Other causes, like the commercial netting of Atlantic salmon, are proximate, acute and easily remedied. As the good lord knows, and as Lord Percy points out, the North Atlantic Salmon Fund created and run by Orri Vigfusson, with assistance from its partners has provided a super-efficient solution to commercial netting that we can all help deliver. Commercial netting is one of the most serious and immediate threats to the Atlantic salmon and probably the easiest to eliminate, with no harm to any party, if we all support the efforts of the NASE.

David L. Goodman
Virginia, USA

To hit them high, hit them hard

Having bought my December/January issue of *Field Sports* last week I have been compelled to write to you about the article you published by Chris Batha.

I'm sorry to say that I can find little in the article that bears out any of the findings I have made over the last 30 years of practical test and experimentation. Mr. Batha appears to have used information supplied by others but without doing any practical scientific experimentation to back up his assertions. This is a shame, as, in my experience, once an article is published, it is considered to be fact by most of the public.

Therefore, I would like to challenge Mr. Batha and your

magazine to prove the following statements made in the article, to be true:

1) "Modern cartridge case and shot-wad combinations can place 80 per cent of the shot charge in a 30" circle at 40 yards." Bear in mind that most shoots require fibre wads to be used today and that Mr. Batha is advocating the use of "bigger pellets", though he does not specify what size. In all my years of patterning guns, I have never achieved what Mr Batha is suggesting on more than a few occasions, and certainly not with the 100 per cent consistency that might be interpreted from his article. Therefore, I challenge him to show that he can get over 75 per cent of patterns, out of a test of 100 shots, into a 30" circle.

2) That bigger pellets penetrate better at longer range. I would agree that on a horizontal plane they carry more retained energy and can penetrate further, however, this article is about high birds and in experiments I have done using helium-filled balloons, the opposite proved to be the case. Therefore, I challenge him to shoot 25 cartridges of the same load and make, but one with No. 7 shot, the other with No. 4 shot, at a penetration box suspended 120ft above the ground and to prove his assertion.

3) "A long shot string = greater margin for error." With Mr. Batha advocating the use of full choke and large shot for shooting high birds, I would love him to prove that this combination makes for shorter shot strings than more open choked guns when fired either horizontally or vertically. Therefore, I hope Mr. Batha can recreate Bob Brister's (done first in the 1920s by Sir Gerald Burrard) experiment using the same cartridges fired through a measured .040" (full choke) and a .020" (half choke) at 40 yards. Twenty-five cartridges out of each should give sufficient average, preferably fired vertically but, if necessary, horizontally at a measured 40 yards.

It is very easy to read a few books, shoot a few clays, shoot a few birds and then concoct an article and present it as fact. I hope your magazine and Mr. Batha take up my challenge; if you prove me wrong then I will be very happy to make a full and unreserved retraction of what I have said in this e-mail.

I really enjoy your magazine which I consider the best published in Britain. However, articles of the likes of Mr Batha's, in my opinion, drag your magazine to a lower level.

Mark Crudgington
(George Gibbs Ltd)



Chris Batha responds...

Dear Mark,

Thank you for your insights and enlightening information on your personal experiments. I have learned a lot.

Unfortunately, I do not own a £50,000 high-speed camera, a computerised shotgun pattern analyser or a walk-in cold room full of ballistic gelatin – all of which are the accepted professional/industry tools used to establish scientific proof of how a shotgun cartridge actually performs. Without these, all is personal conjecture.

The majority of the best estates insist on the use of fibre wads and I agree that fibre wads do fall short of the performance of cartridges with plastic wads. And, yes, a short shot string is far more efficient than a long one. The pattern density at any given range is variable from cartridge to cartridge – perhaps I should have written 70 to 80 per cent.

I have written time and time again that the only way to establish the performance of your personal selection of gun, cartridge and choke at the range you are shooting a bird, is to test it at the pattern plate as not everyone has access to a 120ft high penetration box.

While it cannot be disputed that large shot and tight chokes are needed to kill cleanly at longer ranges, it is hard to find any high bird estates supplying 28g No. 7s. However, I have no doubt that the standard estate cartridge would burst a helium balloon at 40 yards.

Chris Batha



**FROM THE
FIELDSPORTS
FACEBOOK PAGE...**

Prince William called a hypocrite by the Daily Mirror

Why research a story when you already know what you want to say... simple logic for simple minds. I've always wondered about the fairness of a political columnist being gifted the privilege of their own soapbox off which to vent their political bile, left or right. It ranks right up there on a par with royal privilege, but without the intense criticism should you happen to even whisper something stupid.

Owen Williams

Imagine the poor state of British animal welfare without the shooting community, the ignorance of the urban lefties is always staggering, but then again they do think food really does come from a supermarket!

Richard de Gerber





PHOTOGRAPH: TWEED MEDIA

PHOTOGRAPH: MATT HARRIS

WHERE IN THE WORLD IN 80 DAYS?

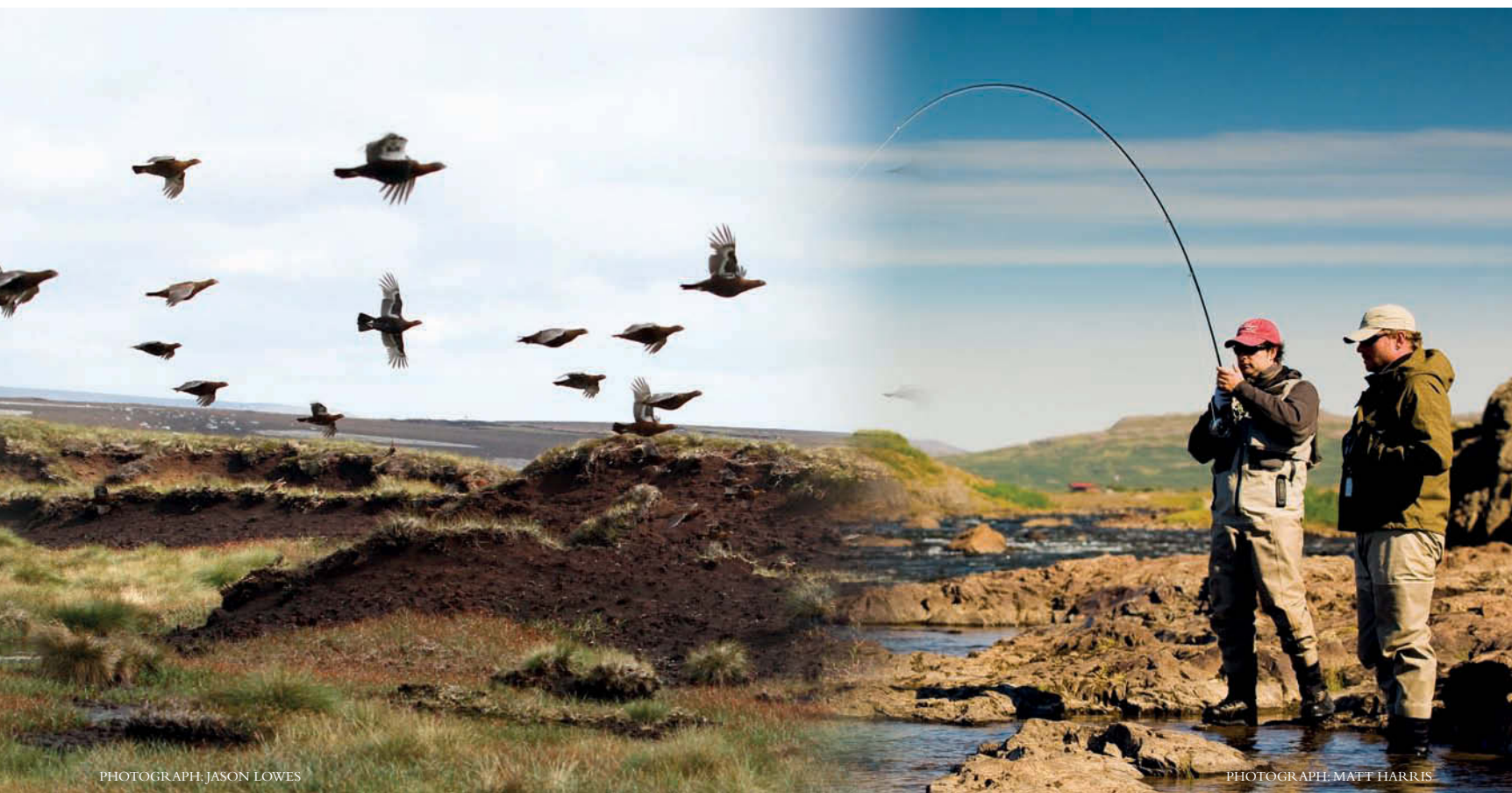
Following an unexpected visit from The Big Man upstairs, Lord James Percy is left with a quandary on his hands.

So, you are sitting at your desk at the end of January, eyeing up the scudding clouds out of the window, thinking about how great it would be to be in a stand of beeches, drilling pigeons on a flight line, or standing under a hanging wood out of which burst high, curling pheasants, or scanning the horizon out of a grouse butt in September, or casting across a bubbly slide full of sea trout

at midnight or... But look! The grey clouds part and a pearlescent light shines as a huge hand reaches down and a finger beckons. A deep voice rumbles and The Big Man tells you that you have been chosen to spend 80 days of sport across the globe, that you will return by Christmas having not lost a minute of your life, that no one will know that you have been gone, that your mates will be there to share, but not to remember.

Eighty days, anywhere in the world, what would I do, where would I go?

First off, not too far – a final day in January shooting (at) high pheasants. Next would be, as the month turns, an afternoon roost shoot with thousands of pigeons, a howling gale and snow. To round off the home schedule I would spend a couple of days fighting pigeons heading to feed on rape or kale, the tips of the green just



PHOTOGRAPH: JASON LOWES

PHOTOGRAPH: MAFF HARRIS

uncovered in the snow. It's all about the recce, the fieldcraft, the building of the hide. Coffee from the flask, your piece eaten by 10:30. Then the sport of kings, empty cartridge bag and the dogs picking up the last bird. Then facing the weight of the sack, gun, kit and a half-mile slog in the mud and ice all the way back to the car.

As the cold and exhaustion saps into my bones, I wait for the heater to get to work in the old Hilux, and rest my head for a moment. Thoughts turn to sun and warmth, and turquoise-blue sea. Was I dreaming that The Big Man up top had handed me the 80-day dispatch orders? After all, church and all that are not really my thing – I am certain to go down the way, rather than up, when the time comes.

I open my eyes and smell salt and feel warm water lapping the tops of my knees. I squint across the water and the glare-cutting Jackie Os pick out ghost-like movement across the sand flats. The 9wt rod is already in my hand, a perfect tight-looped cast (remember, this is

make believe) snakes across the water to plop a Bug-Eyed Shrimp into the path of a double-digit bonefish. The line tightens as I strip and the fish turns and peels off 200 yards of line. I make a creel of bonefish and then spot a permit in the surf. Never caught one of them.

“But look! The grey clouds part and a pearlescent light shines as a huge hand reaches down and a finger beckons.”

On the edge of the reef where sand meets coral and the surf is strong, a school of tarpon cruise into the bay, the 9wt turns into something a little stronger and a royal battle ensues with a 200lb monster. Sun and salt in my hair, skin tingling, clothes stiff and wet, I wade back towards a heavenly lodge, miles of empty beach and spend a week catching every sort of tropical bluewater fish with a fly.

On the seventh night, as my head hits the pillow, my mind begins to wander south. I wake the next morning to different sounds, a cool, windswept, treeless landscape, a silver river

snaking up towards the distant mountains. As I sip coffee, washing down scrambled eggs and crispy bacon, I see a big bow wave on the lip of a pool as a big Tierra del Fuego sea trout makes his way upstream.

This is all too much, all the things I long to do, all Christmases coming at once. Waist deep, hood up, fighting a constant wind. As the line swings round, deep down I feel a solid pull and strike.

Mad runs, tail-walking, triple somersault jumps and finally, in the shallows, a mid-20lb sea trout glaring at me with his piercing eye. Sleeves wet, crouching over my prize with supporting hands and crooked elbow, we live together for a minute or two. Mouth and gills opening alternately, he sucks in pure Argentinian water from the Rio Grande. I feel his strength return as oxygen courses through his body. His tail waves and with a flex and a twist the great trout, of Scottish ancestry, drenches me and fins out of sight.

Since we are over here, wouldn't it be an idea to have a couple of sessions on the doves ➡

HEAVENLY SPORT



PHOTOGRAPH: TARQUIN MILLINGTON-DRAKE

up in Cordoba? I fall asleep, smelling of fish, dark stormy skies outside and relentless wind, but I wake to warm sun streaming through the window. No naked breasts against the cool glass this time, but outside is different altogether. A whitewashed courtyard, the smell of gun oil, leather. Men and boys in khaki and the odd Panama hat, ice boxes, a hammock and a hunk of beef for the barbie. Another enormous breakfast and out onto a dusty road. I see a few doves and pigeons fighting down to the fields but it is early yet. We turn up a rutted dirt track into the foothills. Under the shade of a stand of poplars we park-up and head on foot up a dry riverbed. A half-hour passes and little flurries of doves start flying past. For two hours the flurries grow to streams of hundreds, then thousands of birds, fast, high, medium, low. Great sport, hundreds of shells down the range, cold beer, charred fillet of beef, pink inside. Kip in a hammock, shoot the breeze for the afternoon with the local guys. Then it's off to a different spot, birds coming the other way. The wind has picked up and they are either way-up or contour-hugging like Highland grouse.

Ideal. Getting the hang of this now. Mr. Benn had to go into the fancy dress shop – I just have to let my imagination fly! Another sleep of exhaustion on a featherbed mattress and pillows that make you smile. Where else do I dream of going? It is March now and I am not sure of the timings – maybe Southern Africa to catch tigerfish and flight sandgrouse or blue doves. Or maybe Alaska, up to where you can ski on glaciers that no man has ever set foot on in the morning, and catch Pacific salmon in the afternoon. Dorado fishing – that's another one I would like to do – big aggressive golden-scaled creatures that fight like mad and get pretty big. They live up in the sub tropical rivers of Southern and Central America and fishing for them sounds quite key. March, April, May – lean sport back home in the Northern Hemisphere but how about hooking up with Robson Green or Jeremy Wade and doing some extreme fishing in faraway parts of the world. Hopping from continent to continent, desert islands and steamy jungles, blue-green glacier meltwaters to gin clear mountain streams. What a life.

Early June – Murmansk airport, for old



times' sake. A couple of hours in the heli and down to Pana camp. Ivan's stream, Yogi's Rock, Betty Ford and Morley's Crack. Deep wading, big casting, bright silver fish and nothing too technical. Then a day or two on the Ponoi at Ryagaba, more of the same but perhaps a few bigger ones. And then further north on the Kola Peninsula to the Kharlovka, the Varzina or the Litza where the big boys run. I wonder what the rivers are like further east? Are there undiscovered streams full of salmon all the way along the northern Russian seaboard from



PHOTOGRAPH: RICHARD LOVELL

Archangel to Irkutsk? At what point do they change from Atlantic salmon to cherry, coho, pink or kings? How amazing would it be to find a river in Mongolia and do a float trip for a thousand miles, camping, catching trout and salmon, exploring the wilds, dodging bears and wolves and rogue Cossacks. They say the Kamchatka Peninsula is full of salmon too, better drop in there for a day or two.

Then across the water and south to British Columbia (is it still ours?) where steelhead run in huge numbers. The U.S. – pure rivers in Montana, clear blue streams coming off the Rockies, full of wild brown and rainbow trout to 40 inches. How many days have we got left? Miss out Canada or try for a big one on the Cascapedia? Got to go to Iceland, riffled hitch, tiny Red Francis, salmon and grilse so diamond-silver they could have been polished in Hatton Garden. Deep gorges and flats, gravel and rock slabs, frothy water, crystal clear. Pods of fish piling into the pools, sea trout, Arctic char. (What have we done to our own fish?)

The call of home, and Scotland is getting strong now, but I can't go back yet. Forty days

have gone, it is slipping away too fast. Got to get to Norway, to fish the Alta, the Roma, the Vosso. Famous names, famous fish. Crashing water, bungalow-sized mid-stream boulders and cathedral cliffs rising to the never-setting sun. Steinfoss, Varhiniva, Banus, Barilla. Viking names for legendary pools.

Maybe I have fished enough, August 12 is now past, my day bank is dwindling but can't be wasted. It couldn't be wasted though, up on the heather moors, day after day of adrenaline and sweat, dust and cordite. So much more to do. Are there sea trout in Greenland? And what about wild trout in New Zealand's South Island? I confess to being a silver fish man but I hear about hidden rivers, snowcapped mountains, tropical forest below, fjords that make the ones in Norway look like cracks in the pavement, and with my 80 days I must go there too.

Eighty days of sport, maybe just over half fishing, just under half shooting. Thank God I am not so keen on big game, though a wild boar shoot is clearly very key. Keep 20 for the grouse, half a dozen for wild partridges in

England and in Spain (what about Hungary, Romania and Ukraine for wild greys?) and the rest for a bit of covert shooting, some doves in Argentina and of course the pigeons at home. I wish they were like they used to be.

What an unbelievable world we live in. Fishing can take one to more incredible places than one could dream of. But what about catching a mahseer, shooting wild quail in Georgia? Oh Lord, 80 days is not enough!

But spare a thought for Blighty. Maybe there are too many people, houses, concrete or blacktop, light and townies. Maybe we have buggered-up the salmon fishing, polluted the rivers, scooped out all the fish, sprayed out all the insects, grubbed out a lot of hedges. Maybe we harbour extremists and antis but... There are still some corners, enchanted almost to those of us who choose to go there, where pigeons roost, where pheasants cockle, where grouse, snipe, woodcock and ducks fly. Don't forget the ratting, and bunnies. And while far fields in distant countries may have bounty beyond our wildest dreams, there is just something about home. Eighty one, eighty two, eighty three...

FROM A STANDING START

Mike Barnes looks at how, in nine years, Chris Butterfield has created a first class shoot in Nottinghamshire.

Standing amid all that goes into a proper country fair, I raised my gaze to the distance. It was apparent that this was a farm with a story to tell. The fair itself gave a good hint of what the organisers were about as the stalls mirrored their interests. Not the usual tat on display, but a sunny day out for kindred sporting spirits in summer garb.

Moreover, a wander to the fair's perimeter where have-a-go clays (not of a competitive nature) were on offer, a keen eye would observe flourishing field margins and a wealth of tree planting. Make no mistake, Widmerpool's North Lodge Farm can lay claim to being a classic 1,000-acre farm with a major nod to game and conservation.

The fair was one of three events during a single week organised by Chris and Julia

Butterfield that raised £100,000. It was a one-off, they stressed: "We just wanted to do something of a charitable nature," said Julia. "And here we are!" She laughed, barely able to believe the success of the occasion. "We have been lucky with the weather, and it has been a terrific team effort. Everyone has been great."

The GWCT was a major beneficiary of the money raised. Chatting to Chris, it was clear that this was a couple who really do care, and have poured energy and effort into transforming this slice of rolling Nottinghamshire countryside. So, I made a mental note to return to find out more.

Four months later I found myself bringing my car to a halt in front of their delightful farmhouse home at the heart of the estate. The owner could not have made me more welcome,



Chris Butterfield & son James


introducing me to the guest team of Guns. Yes, it was a shoot day and I was to see it (and photograph it) in action.

I knew three of the eight Guns – Sir Edward Nall, who has been a stalwart supporter of the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, Richard Beeby (who I met on a Fathers & Sons day at Buckminster) and Tim Furbank of Oakbank (suppliers of game cover and advice). The remainder were mostly farming/shooting pals.

Chris is clearly passionate about the place and has shown a capacity for creativity in the way he has mined its potential. He explains: "The overriding objective has been to create a compact 1,000-acre estate in a single block which is our home and which integrates conservation HLS/ELS/voluntary options, planting, ponds, scrapes, habitat, predator control, game covers, 40 acres of woodland, over-winter feeding, recreation (walking, shooting, wildlife) and business (farming and livery). Livery is an operation for up to 50 horses including over-winter polo ponies. ➡



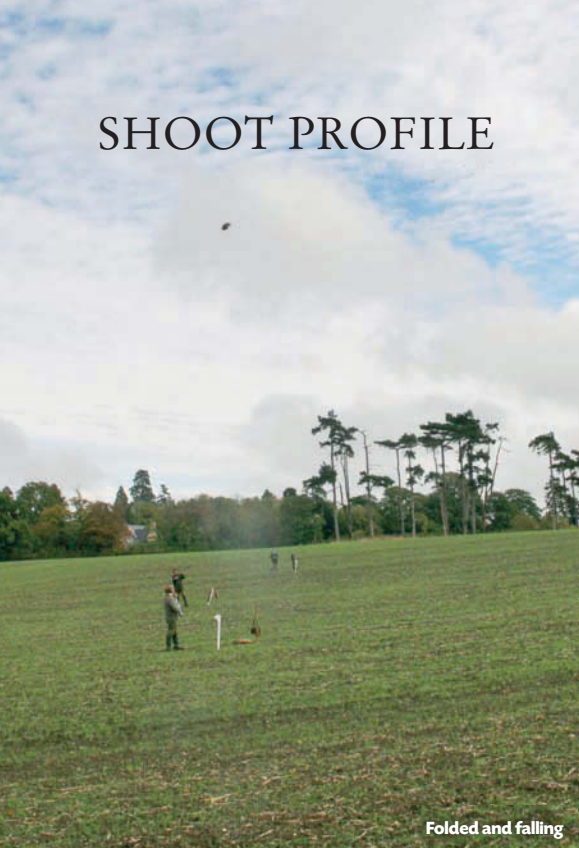
Enjoying the day...
Tim Furbank & Tom Barton



“Chris is clearly
passionate about the
place and has shown a
capacity for creativity
in the way he has
mined its potential.”

Only gentle gradients, but well
presented pheasants

SHOOT PROFILE



Folded and falling



Back Gun Sir Edward Nall
watches the men out front

Not surprisingly, North Lodge was one of the winners of the 2014 NFU Nottinghamshire Farm Environment Awards.

And yet the owner is a chartered accountant who has spent the last 25 years working in residential property investment. “We started farming nine years ago. We have three children who all love the countryside and shoot and stalk. Our sons James and Mark live in London, while Anna is in Botswana and has a safari business in the Okavango Delta.” Separately, the family co-owns a 22-bed safari lodge in Eastern Botswana, on the Limpopo River.

Chris is not from a shooting background. “My introduction to the sport came from my in-laws. I married into a Lincolnshire farming family who have a first class shoot and are good Shots. Soon after we were married, I took it up, and loved it.”

He had always wanted to farm, so owning his



Chris Butterfield

“And so began the transformation involving the planting of 5,000 trees and 25 acres of game cover.”



own shoot was perhaps inevitable. He started with 750 acres in 2008, and added a further 250 acres in 2010. Somewhat fortuitously, the latter parcel was on North Lodge's boundary. Perfect!

All the shooting was taken in-hand. And so began the transformation involving the planting of 5,000 trees and 25 acres of game cover. It could be argued that the final piece of the jigsaw was the arrival 18 months ago of headkeeper Matt Tipping, formerly of Place Newton, a good commercial shoot in Yorkshire.

"Matt was a real find. He has been able to use his considerable gamekeeping skills, as opposed to being restricted to oiling the wheels of a heavy shoot programme." Already he has upped the count of grey partridges to 11 coveys.

Unlike Yorkshire, there are no steep valleys so drives have been created to make best possible use of what gradient there is. They have also experimented with several strains of pheasant in ➡



The day's full team



Experimenting with pheasant strains has paid off



Headkeeper
Matt Tipping

SHOOT PROFILE

All yours!

Julia hands out the elevenses



GAME COVER

The 25 acres of game cover are as follows:

For shelter and feed value: annual maize and dwarf sorghum, perennial millet. Five year rotation: chicory, canary grass and yellow blossom clover.

For brood cover: buckwheat, chicory, camelina, fodder radish, quinoa, mustard, and forage rape.

Wild bird/tree sparrow mixes: triticale, red/white millet, quinoa included in HLS/ELS options.

search of good fliers that won't stray – Japanese crosses, ringneck and blackneck, bazanty, and Michigan bluebacks.

Going from drive to drive it was possible to see for myself the nurturing of the farm and shoot at first hand, a shoot in its stride. Well presented game, in attractive settings, and some excellent shooting, too. Not forgetting a very good lunch.

Full marks to the Butterfields and North Lodge – it was all as I suspected it might be. And more besides. As I looked through my Canon lens, I could see an awful lot of smiles, both in front of the shooting line, and behind the scenes.

This was the third of 10 days – there's lots to look forward to.

GUNS:

Chris Butterfield, Tom Barton, Nigel Baxter, Richard Beeby, Sam Coates, Tim Furbank, Sir Edward Nall & Andrew Woodhouse.

THE BAG:

228 pheasants, 53 redleg partridges.

A good team of pickers-up are kept busy





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PLANNING AHEAD

Weedy over-winter stubbles provide winter cover and food

Although the 2014/15 game shooting season is now behind us, there is work yet to be done, says Tim Furbank of Oakbank Game & Conservation. Now is the time when shoot owners and managers should take stock and assess where things can be improved for next year.

Unless you are fortunate enough to be heading to Spain for some late season partridges, another season has passed. But if you run a shoot, now is the time to carry out important woodland work, plan to alter drives and crops where necessary and, most importantly, look after the birds that are left on the ground. Focus is always on the shoot returns, however, have you ever asked yourself what happens to the remaining birds left in February? If your shoot returns are 40 per cent, you may want to consider the remaining 60 per cent and perhaps continue to invest in those that have survived until February, to provide some wild stock on the

ground for next season.

February and March are the months when natural food is in shortest supply and winter cover is at a premium. By continuing to feed your pheasants and redlegs through this period and preferably through April as well, you will minimize the natural dispersal of the birds as well as getting them in good condition for nesting. This will increase your chances of some of them nesting successfully in the wild and producing broods. You will also significantly help the resident and migrant songbird population. If you have wild grey partridges, hopefully you have already identified where your pairs are located and are keeping them fed in their territories, ideally

allocating a feed hopper to every pair and leaving out a few surplus hoppers in case you have missed a pair or two.

Before the arable crops start to grow, you can easily assess how much winter cover you actually have on the farm. If you drive around and see bare woodland, flat cover crops and sparse hedgerows, it will hopefully set the alarm bells ringing! Well managed woodland provides perfect winter habitat for a whole host of birds, mammals and insects, but far too many shoots neglect their woodland in favour of cover crops as woodland management is long-term, whereas cover crops provide an instant fix.

Immediately post shooting season is an ideal time to carry out

ride clearance, coppicing, removal of poorer trees and thinning, as well as replanting where necessary. Coppicing and thinning of woodlands provides light and structure, with the return of ground flora, a shrub layer as well as a canopy and room for trees to mature. This is ideal for pheasants, both reared and wild, providing winter warmth, roosting and summer nesting. Clear-felling areas of mature and derelict woodland may seem brutal and may deprive you of a drive or two in the short-term, but in the long-run it will provide a far more diverse and attractive habitat. For any of this work to be successful, it has to be done in conjunction with a robust deer management policy.

More often than not, the first week of February sees flails and ploughs hitting the old game covers and some very bemused pheasants and partridges standing around wondering where the canteen has gone! If you still have crops that are standing up and providing some cover, please

leave them as long as you can. To get round this problem, why not plant some biennials, e.g. kale, sweet clover and perennials such as chicory, canary grass and miscanthus. By providing good cover in the late winter/early spring, they attract songbirds and gamebirds alike, enabling you to concentrate your feeding efforts in certain areas. If you don't have any stubbles or winter forage crops, then crops such as these are essential if you want to hold any stock of grey partridges on your ground and, more importantly, to protect the stock you do have from predation by raptors.

Look at the areas where you are finding any densities of gamebirds and especially pairs of grey partridges, and plan to sow some biennial or perennial crops this spring. For the grey partridges, as well as winter cover, the provision of insect-rich 'brood-rearing' cover for the summer months is also essential, so consider how you will provide that for the pairs you identify. If they are found on an existing cereal field, then consider sacrificing the outside six metres of headland to act as a

'conservation headland'. Don't apply any insecticide or herbicide in the spring (unless you have major cleaver problems) and avoid applying nitrogen to the headland and it will provide a reasonable foraging area.

Alternatively, if you find a pair near an uncropped field or existing game crop, then make sure part of it is sown with a low rate cereal as soon as possible. You could also add a few combining peas to the cereal and/or some lucerne and vetch. Again, no herbicides, insecticides or fertilizer should be applied to this strip as we want a fairly thin, open, weedy crop that is full of bugs. Under Environmental Stewardship, cultivated margins for arable plants and well-structured floristic margins also deliver fantastic brood-rearing habitats

and, under the new Basic Payment Scheme, fallow areas not only provide open weedy areas but also contribute to your Environmental Focus Areas requirement.

The winter cover crop, on the other hand, needs to be grown as a crop to ensure it provides a robust canopy through the winter. Don't skimp on inputs for your main game covers or wild bird seed mixes as this is false economy. Our trials site showed the importance of nitrogen when trying to grow good kale in particular, but many of the wild bird seed species showed similar responses.

Another important thing to consider when selecting your crop is its proximity to other crops. Last year we found that it was almost impossible to get a brassica crop established if it was adjacent to

“Before the arable crops start to grow, you can easily assess how much winter cover you have...”



Strips of perennial cover such as canary grass and chicory provide fantastic winter cover as well as nesting and brood rearing shelter



Wild flower margins provide perfect insect-rich habitats to feed a host of farmland birds and mammals



Beetle banks provide good nesting cover, and a second year wild bird mix alongside delivers good brood rearing cover

GAMEKEEPING

a field of oilseed rape – the flea beetle numbers were astronomical.

Whilst planning for next year, you need to find out how the new Basic Payment Scheme may affect your shoot. For arable farms over 30ha, apart from having to grow at least three different crops, the farm has to have 5 per cent of the arable area as 'Environmental Focus Area' and you may find the shoot and the farm can work together to deliver this. The farmer has five habitat options under which he/

she can deliver the 5 per cent EFA: hedgerows, watercourse buffer strips, fallow land, catch/cover crops and nitrogen fixing crops (e.g. peas/beans). From a shoot viewpoint, the fallow land and catch/cover crops are very interesting as you can grow wild bird seed mixes and nectar flower mixes on the former and brassica/cereal mixes on the latter.

As I write this, we have just received more information about the scheme to replace Environmental Stewardship. After months of debating what it should be called, Defra has come up with a new name – the 'Countryside Stewardship Scheme'. Er, is this Groundhog day? There will be

three tiers of agreement – Higher Tier, to replace HLS but for the most environmentally important sites and woodlands only; Middle Tier, to replace ELS but focused on water protection and improving farmed environment for birds and pollinators; and Lower Tier, to include capital payments for options such as woodland creation/management, hedgerows and boundary features.

Water capital grants and woodland creation grants are now available whilst applications for Countryside Stewardship can be made from July with a closing date of September. This means that there is a very small window of opportunity to apply, and it is in the middle of harvest! Therefore, if you are considering applying, now is the time to start looking at the possibilities and making plans – don't wait until July! New

agreements will begin in 2016. For further info please go to www.gov.uk/cap-reform

Finally, if you have a shoot of which you are justifiably proud, which delivers farmland biodiversity, engages the local community and provides some sporting birds, then please consider entering the Purdey Awards for Game & Conservation. You don't need to have a big estate to win, as last year's joint winner, George Eaton from Buckinghamshire, discovered. George's oasis is a 150-acre mixed farm which provides three small days' shooting for family and friends. The conservation and educational work that George undertakes is exceptional but is underpinned by the fact that he wants to be able to shoot a few pheasants.

www.purdey.com/shooting-life/purdey-awards.



February and March are the months when natural food is in shortest supply and winter cover is at a premium



Tim Furbank is a director of Oakbank Game & Conservation which specialises in the supply of seeds, plants and advice for the creation of wildlife habitat on farmland, particularly for game. Tim has an in-depth understanding of agriculture, conservation and game shooting, and is also on the judging panel for the Purdey Awards for Game & Conservation.
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A cultivated margin provides weeds and insects for grey partridge broods



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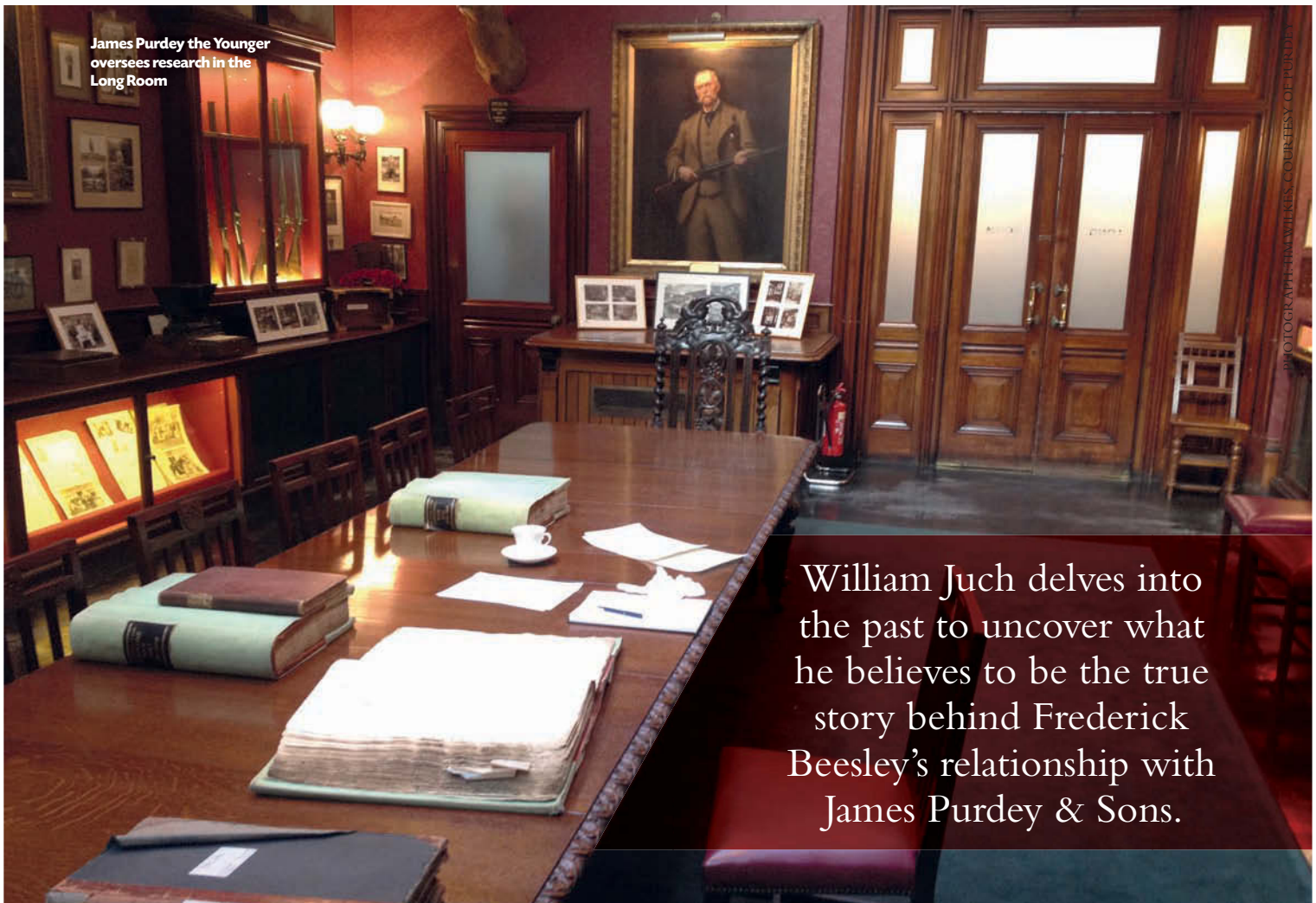
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Conventional wisdom



William Juch delves into the past to uncover what he believes to be the true story behind Frederick Beesley's relationship with James Purdey & Sons.

Galileo challenged the conventional wisdom of Ptolemaic physics which held that gravity acted on weight of a given substance. Thus a heavier iron ball would fall faster than a lighter one. Galileo performed a critical experiment when he climbed the Tower of Pisa with a small and a large iron ball. Again and again they hit the ground at

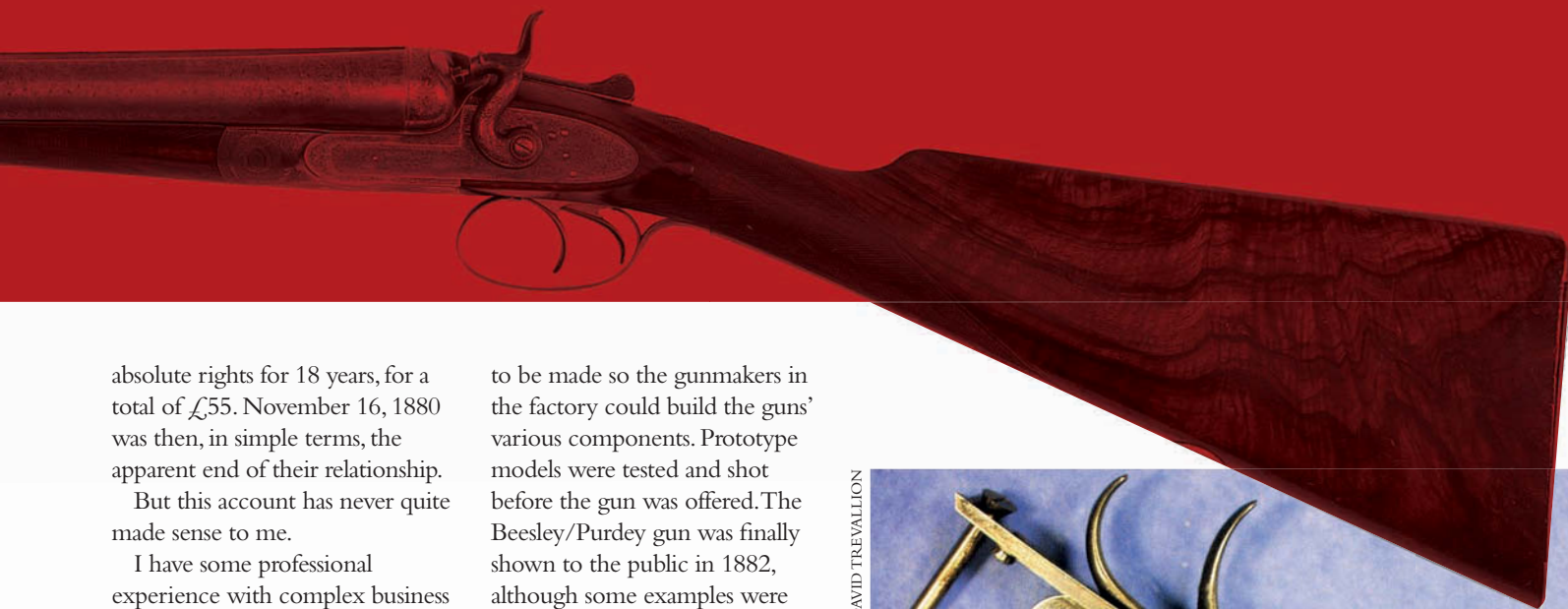
the same time. As Sir Karl Popper might say, he refuted the Ptolemaic theory with his critical experiment. Knowledge, particularly in the scientific realm, progresses by disproving theories, rather than by proving them.

The conventional wisdom surrounding the relationship between Frederick Beesley and the famous gunmakers Purdey, asserts that the former was apprenticed to

Wm. Moore and Grey before he began working for James Purdey the Younger – joining the firm as a salaried stocker in August 1869. Purdey lore relates that Frederick was fired in May of 1878 for 'spending too much time in the pub', after which he started up his own firm from his flat at 22 Queen Street, off the Edgware Road. In 1879, Beesley invented his celebrated self-opening action,

protected by a provisional patent, which he soon offered to his erstwhile employer.

In January of 1880, James the Younger bought the rights to the action for £20, plus 5 shillings per gun, just before the patent was sealed. Beesley returned to making guns at 22 Queen Street, before Mr. Purdey subsequently bought out the full rights to the patent for the sum of £35, hence gaining



PHOTOGRAPH: PATRICK HAVES, BONHAMS

absolute rights for 18 years, for a total of £55. November 16, 1880 was then, in simple terms, the apparent end of their relationship.

But this account has never quite made sense to me.

I have some professional experience with complex business system patents. More importantly, having spent time with my old friend David Trevallion – an articulated Purdey stockmaker – in his workshop, observing him using gauges, templates and other tools of the handmade Purdey gun, some of which had been handed down from gaffer to apprentice over generations, it seemed implausible that even the most skilled gun actioners, stockers and so on could build up an unheralded gun merely from a patent description and patent drawings.

Stephan Hutton, a Churchill-trained gunmaker who saw the original Zenith models, drawings and tooling, confirmed this notion. Beesley, therefore, must have had a continuing involvement with Purdey after he had sold them his patent. As a practical gunmaker, Beesley must have had a hands-on relationship working alongside his old friends in order to perfect the action to the elegant, nascent Purdey bar lock hammerless style. Metal gauges, action forgings, and special tools such as the drill bit for the hand pin, had to be made-up through a trial and error process.

Locks, springs, bridles and other metal work would have to be sent back and forth to the lock makers for their input during the prototype phase. When finalised, a sufficient quantity of tools needed

to be made so the gunmakers in the factory could build the guns' various components. Prototype models were tested and shot before the gun was offered. The Beesley/Purdey gun was finally shown to the public in 1882, although some examples were probably in use earlier than that. In sum, my conjecture is that Frederick Beesley must have had a continuing practical as well as business relationship with Purdey, during and after 1880.

I put this theory to my British co-author Tim Wilkes on numerous occasions while we were researching our forthcoming book on Frederick Beesley. I finally came up with a critical experiment of my own, namely that if there was NO mention of Frederick Beesley in the Purdey records as a practical gunmaker during and after 1880, then my theory would be wrong and the conventional account would hold. If Beesley did have a continuing relationship in order to perfect the first iteration of the design, then my theory would be right and the conventional wisdom would need to be revised.

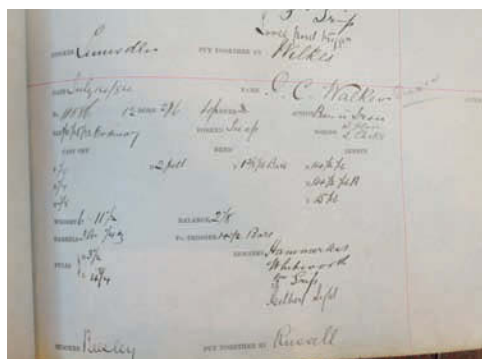
With the continuing kind cooperation of Purdey, Tim was given access to their records for that time period. What he found has clearly disproved the conventional account.

Frederick Beesley resumed working for James the Younger in early 1880. He was paid for working at both the new factory and Audley House, in addition to receiving patent royalty 'progress' payments. He was needed to perfect the new gun design, build

PHOTOGRAPH: WILLIAM JUCH & DAVID TREVALLION



A hand pin and its purpose-built drill bit for the Beesley action trigger plate



Left: A Purdey Dimension Book entry from 1884 showing Beesley as the stocker of a bar-in-iron gun (11586) of his own action design, believed to be the last Beesley built for Purdey



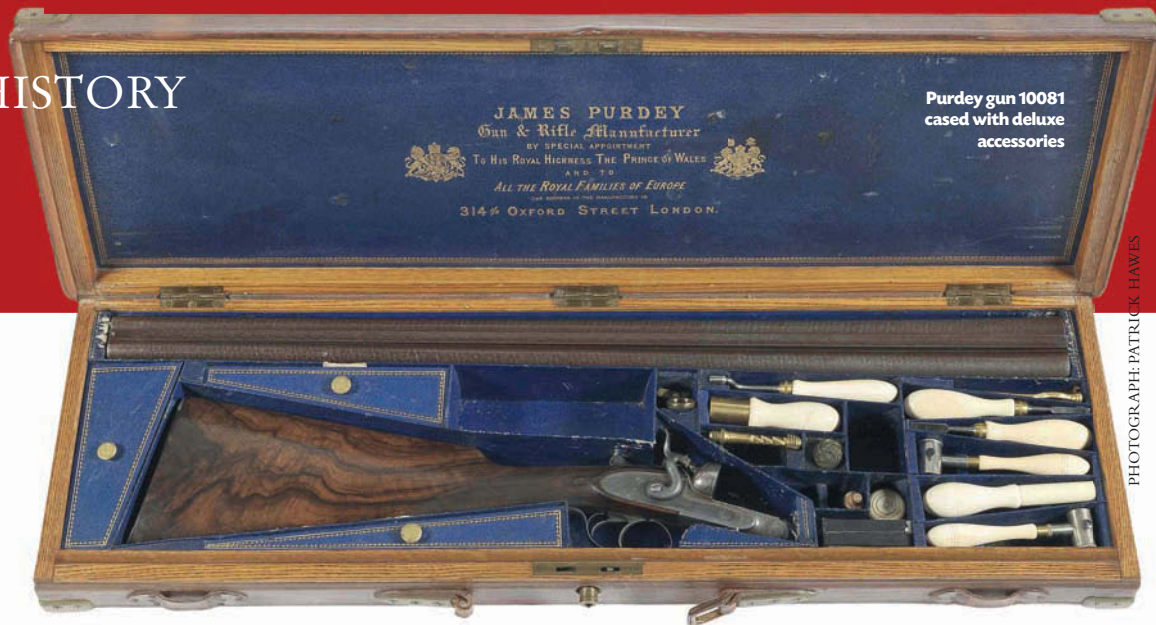
Gun 11586 is a classic Purdey sidelock built by Beesley. Note the carved leaf fences that later became a hallmark of his best guns

PHOTOGRAPH: ANDREW ORR, HOLT'S



Beesley stocked and screwed this Purdey bar-in-wood rebounding lock hammer gun 11382 in 1883

GUNMAKING HISTORY



Purdey gun 10081 cased with deluxe accessories

PHOTOGRAPH: PATRICK HAWES

up the special tooling, and train his old colleagues in building these guns. James the Younger was certainly wise to involve Beesley in this manner – after all, he couldn't pay a royalty on guns that couldn't be made. We surmise that James the Younger and Frederick Beesley modified their agreement so that Beesley would get partial payments as the design and tooling was being realised, and perhaps after that, too.

Thus, in total, Beesley probably received more than the £55 for his patent, since he had several partial royalty payments as his hammerless guns were being perfected and made, until James bought out the patent on November 16, 1880 for £35. Was that payment staggered as well?

As the Purdey rebounding-lock hammerless gun caught on, the record books show he was back at the bench working as a stocker at Purdey by 1881, until 1883, possibly 1884. He worked on approximately 35 guns during this time, many of which were pairs, some bar-in-wood hammer guns, and some double rifles, often marked as "Beesley type" in the Purdey Dimension Book.

We have compiled what we

believe to be a complete list of guns that Beesley 'stocked and screwed' during his various stints at Purdey, beginning in 1869 with a 12 bore, numbered 8042. Frederick Beesley's last gun before his dismissal was a 16 bore pair, 10228/9, started in 1878. After his return in 1880, his first guns built were the pair 11125/6. He worked through to the summer of 1883, when he stocked a pair of Whitworth-barrelled 12 bores, numbered 11552/3 and one final gun, a hammerless Whitworth-barrelled 12 bore of his own design, 11586, delivered in 1884, and last sold by Holt's in 2002.

Despite his marriage being in turmoil, Frederick Beesley was a driven individual, growing in his business acumen and creativity during the period of 1879 – 1884. He was working at Purdey and turning out guns for others

too, possibly the Army & Navy Co-operative Society. In 1879, his firm advertised for an apprentice and he was building guns under his own style. Towards the end of this period, he created several patents that he licensed to other gunmakers, thus providing a steady stream of income, more than he could have made as a well-paid employee. Today, one might say that F. Beesley Enterprises had multiple profit centres.

Finally, we must contend that this puts paid to the notion that James the Younger was some sort of one-dimensional, unreasonable martinet. He clearly had a sound and pragmatic business head. He was quick to recognise the importance of the Beesley action for Purdey's long-term prosperity and, as a practical gunmaker, he knew that Beesley had to assist the firm to realise the design.

Significantly, this may not have been the first time Beesley had returned to Purdey. Ever since then, Purdey have been unstinting in acknowledging Frederick Beesley as the design genius behind the success of their self-opening best guns.

The conventional account, I'd suggest, should be revised in light of this research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Richard Purdey and Pippa Mole of James Purdey and Sons Ltd., Gavin Gardiner, Holt's, Bonhams, Fred and Bruce Buller, Safari Outfitters Ltd. (USA) and Emma Mancroft of the Countryside Alliance.

A 16 bore Purdey (11522) built by Beesley on his self-opening action in May 1883



PHOTOGRAPH: GAVIN GARDINER

*Received of Jas. Purdey Esq.
the sum of Ten pounds due
to me under the terms of our
agreement dated January 2nd 1880
re Patent for Break-down Guns -
(2nd instalment). -
£10.0.0
Fred. Beesley
3-5/86*

William Juch has had careers as an academic, in systems engineering, and as a management consultant. He has a keen interest in country sports and the firms and craftsmen who make sporting guns. If you have a Purdey gun or rifle within the serial number series mentioned in this article and would like to find out if it was 'stocked and screwed' by Frederick Beesley, please feel free to contact the author through this magazine. They would welcome hearing from owners of F. or H. Beesley guns and rifles, too.

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FROM THE GUN SHOP

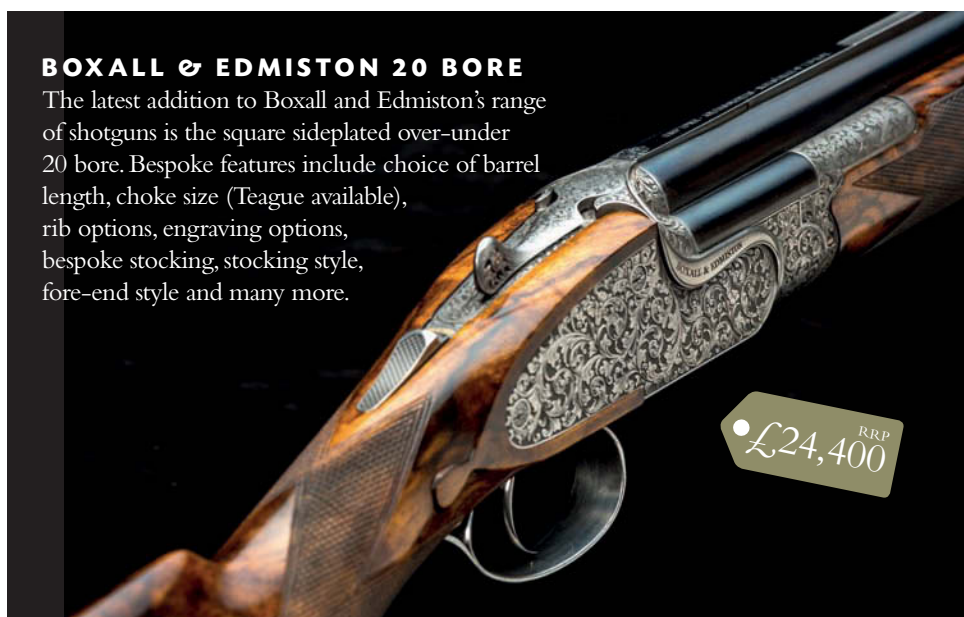
WHAT'S NEW?

New shotguns and rifles on the market.



BENELLI RAFFAELLO POWER BORE

The Raffaello Power Bore is a new semi-automatic from Benelli. Incorporating technical innovations like 'Progressive Comfort', a system that reduces recoil progressively, it also has Power Bore cryogenic barrels featuring selected 18.3 and 18.4 bores as well as a series of functional modifications. It boasts a high speed action and can fire cartridge loads from 24 to 56 grams.



BOXALL & EDMISTON 20 BORE

The latest addition to Boxall and Edmiston's range of shotguns is the square sideplated over-under 20 bore. Bespoke features include choice of barrel length, choke size (Teague available), rib options, engraving options, bespoke stocking, stocking style, fore-end style and many more.



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and is available in .243 Win, .270 Win, .30-06
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a wooden stock version, it is also available in
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The new Blaser BD14 "Bockdrilling"
is an over-under rifle-shotgun combination
with a smaller calibre rifle barrel on the
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action combines an extremely compact and
solid block lockup in a closed system within the
monoblock, with the comfortable handling of a
classic break-action rifle.

There are a choice of four smaller calibres from which
customers can choose, from .22 Hornet to 5.6x22R, and
10 larger calibres including 6.5x55, 7x57, .308 Win,
.30-06 Sprg and 9.3x74R. Even with three barrels, the
BD14 is relatively light, at 3.3kg (7.26lb) without optics.



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The Sako A7 Roughtech combines Sako's well-established
A7 bolt action with their new Roughtech stock, made from a unique
material that is designed to withstand even the roughest handling in
the most severe conditions.

A VERY SWEET SIXTEEN

After testing their new Hesketh De-Luxe 16 bore, Vic Harker is left with nothing but praise for Longthorne's marriage of traditional aesthetics and revolutionary design.



Shotgun design is a well-trodden path, to the extent that the modern gunmaker, for the most part, is recreating the past. In the Longthorne over-under, however, is a gun breaking new ground in significant areas.

Based in Lancashire, Longthorne Gunmakers Ltd. was founded in 2006. James Longthorne Stewart likes to keep some guns in stock, however, demand is such that there are very few available, and so my test gun was a 16 bore, made to order – the Longthorne Hesketh De-Luxe.

Longthorne's over-under gun is built around a sidelock action. While their guns have a uniqueness about them in some areas, they certainly retain an elegant orthodoxy. The action body incorporates handsome shell fences and beaded side-panels that overrun the bottom plate.

My sample gun was covered in bold acanthus leaf engraving set against a richly figured walnut stock, creating an appearance bordering on the exotic.

The action body's low profile is created by a system adopted by most of the best makers of over-under guns.

This system has wedges integral to its interior walls and reciprocating draws on the sides of the barrel

lumps, which come together when the barrels – which pivot on trunnions – are locked into the action by a bifurcated bolt, moving forward from the breech face and engaging with bites at the sides of the bottom barrel.

The four-pin sidelock action has intercepting sears and rebounding hammers. Innovation takes the form of an integrated bridle that provides a rigidity to the lock-work, thus maintaining consistency in operation. What is particularly attractive about all these features are their small dimensions, which, integrated into the gun's design, provide strength without excessive weight. The ejector work is mounted on the barrels' breech ends and is activated by trips on the forend iron.

The stocking of all Longthorne guns is done in-house, to the customers' requirements. My sample gun featured a well-designed semi-pistol grip configuration that provided an excellent hold for use with a single trigger. The forend wood was made to a schnabel shape, although I personally prefer Longthorne's slim beavertail option.

The one-piece barrel assembly is undoubtedly the most unique component of the gun. Although efforts to produce one piece shotgun barrels have been made in the past, neither the materials employed nor the machinery

to make them were up to the task. There are several ways of producing shotgun barrels, but the chopper-lump principle is considered the best. In the case of the over-under, the barrels are dovetailed together at the lumps and then hard soldered. The lumps are pieces of metal integral to the forged tubes, and on the bottom barrel they are left larger to provide sufficient material to joint the barrels to the action. In contrast, the monobloc method, used by most volume manufacturers, is the means by which two separate tubes are inserted into one piece of metal which form the breech ends and the jointing of the barrels. Though immensely strong and much simpler to produce, English makers prefer the former, but both can have their problems in manufacture.

Joining barrels so that they will shoot to the same point of impact involves bending the bottom barrel upwards to the top one, and soldering it in place. This is followed by the fitting of the side ribs, which are also soldered on. It is vital that the barrels converge at a given range, usually at about 40 yards. This is fine if the work is carried out by an expert, but if it is not, the barrels may be found to shoot apart. Longthorne's one-piece assembly, that includes not only the ribs but the jointing of the breech ends and the barrel loop, avoids these complications. Its strength and rigidity is only one benefit of this concept. Accuracy

in terms of placement of the shot charge is another, as with only a 2mm gap between the barrels, they remain perfectly straight and so do not have to be regulated for convergence. My test gun's 28½" barrels were beautifully straight, and they were also light at 2lbs 13oz.

When I first shot a Longthorne sidelock, in 2006, I immediately dubbed it "the gun you shoot and nothing happens". By this, I meant there is a very noticeable lack of recoil. Its maker explained at the time that this was another advantage of perfectly straight barrels. Without any distortion created by the heating process soldering separate ribs can create, the shot charge is not hindered in any way from leaving the barrel, which also explains the lack of muzzle flip. The Longthorne

“... it retains an entirely traditional appearance that, combined with its revolutionary barrel assembly, gives the gun a twist...”

sidelock can be ordered with any barrel length, but I found my test gun's light, relatively short 28½" barrels a perfect combination for fast driven targets at moderate range.

The 16 bore shotgun has long been a favourite of the French, but like most Englishmen, I must admit to have previously given it scant consideration. My test gun, however, wasn't made for an Englishman, and perhaps he appreciated the ballistic advantages of the 16 bore cartridge that Chris

Batha recently described in the pages of this magazine. It also seems that this foreign gentleman appreciated the recoil reducing benefits of barrel porting – another feature discreetly incorporated into the Hesketh De-Luxe.

I tested the gun at two separate shooting grounds. At the first of these, I was shooting at targets of medium range, and with the Longthorne's fast handling characteristics, it was almost just a matter of 'point and shoot'.

I was also interested to find out how this relatively short-barrelled gun handled on longer targets, and so at a ground that provides just

the kind of challenge I was looking for, I put it to the test. The gun was a revelation – so long as

I remembered

not to prescribe great amounts of lead in the sky, and simply allowed the Longthorne's fast handling to keep me on-target. I do, though, see this 16 bore as a gun primarily for shooting lots of birds quickly at moderate range. With that in mind, one would be wise to consider a pair for the grouse moor.

The Longthorne sidelock is a fine achievement, although the innovations it represents, both in design and manufacture, are explained by its maker in such an unpretentious manner, it is

as though he dreamt them all up in a moment. This gun is the product of years that its creator spent at the cutting edge of modern engineering. At the same time, it retains an entirely traditional appearance that, combined with its revolutionary barrel assembly, gives the gun a twist that makes it unique.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS:

Model: Longthorne Hesketh De-Luxe sidelock

Bore: 16

Chambers: 3" steel proved

Barrel Length: 28½" test gun or to customer's requirements

Chokes: Fixed or multi-choke

Rib: 8mm – 4mm

Stock: Semi-pistol grip or to order

Forend: Schnabel or to order

Weight: 7lbs

Price: £18,890

Contact:

Tel. 01772 811215,
www.longthorneguns.com



The godfather returns

After 170 years of dormancy, the fabled name and ingenuity of Joseph Manton is back, in the form of a groundbreaking triple-barrelled 20 bore.

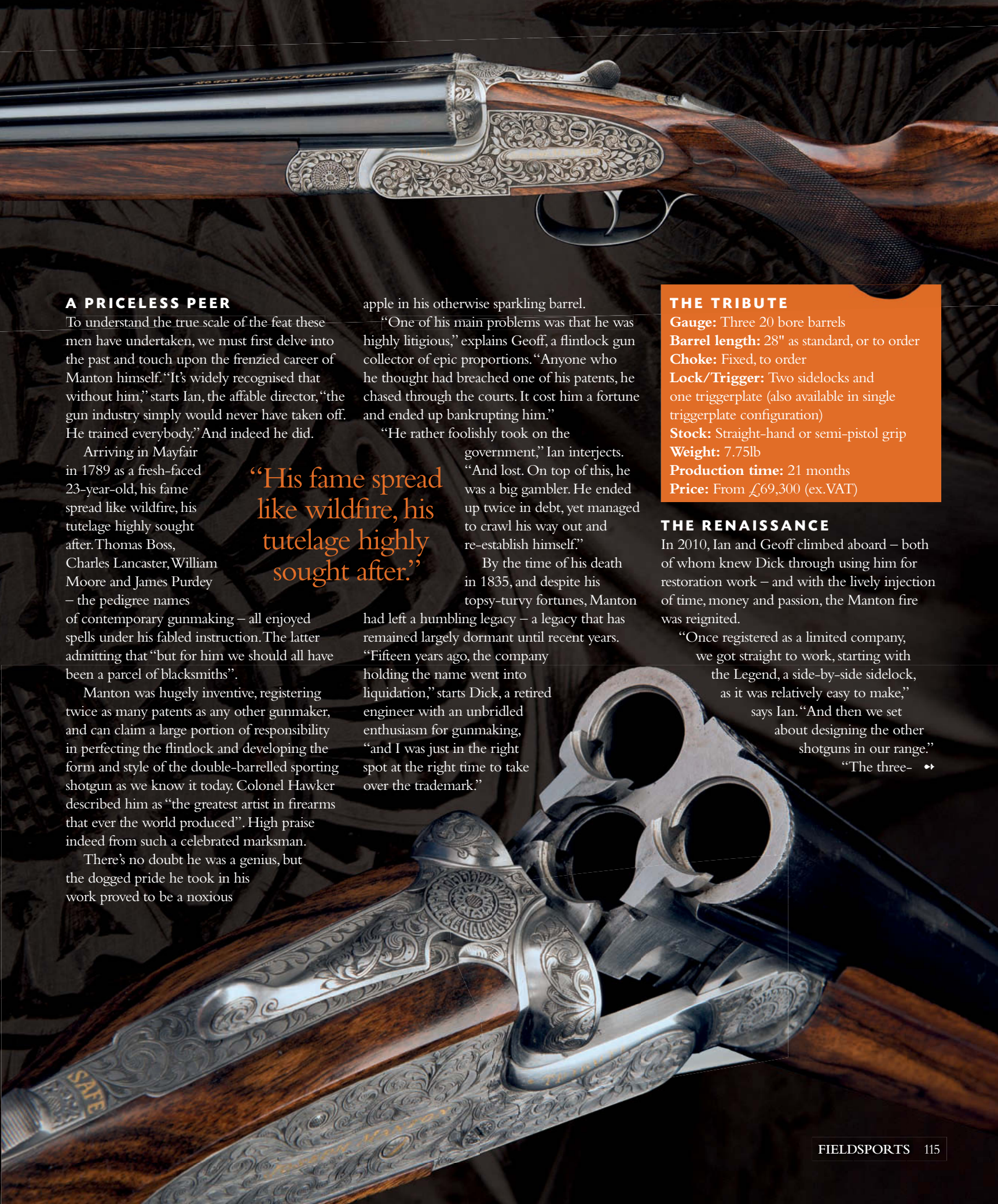
I'd heard the rumours. Although, to be honest, anyone with the slightest proclivity towards gunmaking had – it was big news. The legendary name of Joseph Manton, the irrefutable godfather and leading innovator of the British gun industry, was back. And under the management of three serious fanatics, word on the grapevine was that the company had picked up right where the revered Old Joe had left off, with cutting-edge designs immediately destined for the vices.

The pièce de résistance of their proposed

four-gun range was to be a triple-barrelled 20 bore – a unique tribute to the prodigy himself. It sounded a tad ambitious, to say the least.

That was in 2010, and now, clasping a warm brew on a frosty morning in Sudbury, Suffolk with the brawn and brains behind this renaissance – Geoff Walker, Ian Spencer and Dick Castleton – here it is, in front of my very eyes...





A PRICELESS PEER

To understand the true scale of the feat these men have undertaken, we must first delve into the past and touch upon the frenzied career of Manton himself. "It's widely recognised that without him," starts Ian, the affable director, "the gun industry simply would never have taken off. He trained everybody." And indeed he did.

Arriving in Mayfair in 1789 as a fresh-faced 23-year-old, his fame spread like wildfire, his tutelage highly sought after. Thomas Boss, Charles Lancaster, William Moore and James Purdey – the pedigree names

of contemporary gunmaking – all enjoyed spells under his fabled instruction. The latter admitting that "but for him we should all have been a parcel of blacksmiths".

Manton was hugely inventive, registering twice as many patents as any other gunmaker, and can claim a large portion of responsibility in perfecting the flintlock and developing the form and style of the double-barrelled sporting shotgun as we know it today. Colonel Hawker described him as "the greatest artist in firearms that ever the world produced". High praise indeed from such a celebrated marksman.

There's no doubt he was a genius, but the dogged pride he took in his work proved to be a noxious

apple in his otherwise sparkling barrel.

"One of his main problems was that he was highly litigious," explains Geoff, a flintlock gun collector of epic proportions. "Anyone who he thought had breached one of his patents, he chased through the courts. It cost him a fortune and ended up bankrupting him."

"He rather foolishly took on the

government," Ian interjects.

"And lost. On top of this, he was a big gambler. He ended up twice in debt, yet managed to crawl his way out and re-establish himself."

By the time of his death in 1835, and despite his topsy-turvy fortunes, Manton

had left a humbling legacy – a legacy that has remained largely dormant until recent years.

"Fifteen years ago, the company holding the name went into liquidation," starts Dick, a retired engineer with an unbridled enthusiasm for gunmaking, "and I was just in the right spot at the right time to take over the trademark."

"His fame spread like wildfire, his tutelage highly sought after."

THE TRIBUTE

Gauge: Three 20 bore barrels

Barrel length: 28" as standard, or to order

Choke: Fixed, to order

Lock/Trigger: Two sidelocks and one triggerplate (also available in single triggerplate configuration)

Stock: Straight-hand or semi-pistol grip

Weight: 7.75lb

Production time: 21 months

Price: From £69,300 (ex.VAT)

THE RENAISSANCE

In 2010, Ian and Geoff climbed aboard – both of whom knew Dick through using him for restoration work – and with the lively injection of time, money and passion, the Manton fire was reignited.

"Once registered as a limited company, we got straight to work, starting with the Legend, a side-by-side sidelock, as it was relatively easy to make,"

says Ian. "And then we set about designing the other shotguns in our range."

"The three- ➡

“Manton had a tenacious ambition: to constantly push the boundaries of gunmaking...”

barrelled gun has long been a dream of mine,” states Geoff, “and what a journey it’s been watching this come to fruition.”

The triad talk with a modest calm about the venture thus far, but stepping into the unknown of tackling a unique triple-barrel configuration, while not jeopardising the handling, balance, function and beauty that comes with such a reputed name must have inflicted the odd restless night.

“It is a great name to be able to put on guns that still bear his innovation,” says Geoff. “He was an absolute perfectionist – if anyone got anything even slightly wrong they had to go away and do it all again. We’re trying to continue that ethos in making best London shotguns.”

Manton had a tenacious ambition: to constantly push the boundaries of gunmaking, striving to produce the world’s finest sporting arms. Few would argue that he failed. “He was a pioneer,” adds Ian, “and he would have undoubtedly embraced the technology available today and exploited the potential of advanced machine tools. For this reason, we have no hesitation in using them in our quest for engineering perfection – we want to create the best possible shotguns we can. However, we also know precisely where cutting-edge technology ends and the craftsman’s eyes, hands and experience take over.”

“He certainly would have been thrilled to watch the wire-cutters slice through spring steel that’s been

hardened,” adds Dick, who monitored the pieces through every step of their production. “It’s an amazing process – he would have been the first to jump on the bandwagon.”

And similarly to how Manton was always on the lookout for the best in the business, the trio too are in contact with multiple engravers, stockers, finishers, etc. to ensure they create a piece of ultimate functional art.

SO, HAVE THEY SUCCEEDED?

Do one-legged ducks swim in circles?

The images testify that beauty hasn’t budged an inch. The classic Manton engraving – although one of the custom-made variables – is every bit as striking as Manton flintlocks of yesteryear. And the stock figuring showcases the dark ripples that guns bearing his name were associated with – the very best of the walnut tree, nearest the roots and naturally dried for several decades.

From above, the Tribute looks like your run-of-the-mill side-by-side, and from the flank the barrel depth is actually reduced from that of routine over-unders due to the way in which the third barrel nestles into the groove between the two atop. But what boggles me most is the lack of influence inflicted on the weight and handling.

I had fully primed myself for a chunky instrument, with noticeably more bulk, but this is simply not the case. Even with the additional 28" barrel, action rejigs and added sidelock, this 20 bore weighs 7.75lb – similar to that of



regular 12 bores.

Having got my head around this impressive detail, I turn my attention to the balance – something that was of momentous importance to Joseph Manton. And, happily, I can report that here too they triumph, with the balance about an eighth of an inch in front of the hinge pin, very slightly nose heavy, but all the weight between the hands – as a gun that is destined to see routine action in the field should be.

In fact, the glittering report snowballs when put to use. It handles beautifully – the added weight provoking a smooth and controlled swing. “There were several obstacles along the way,” confirms Dick, such as the complex logistics of three ejectors, but on admiring its exquisite intricacies, it’s unquestionable that the hurdles have been trampled. Emphatically so.

This unique masterpiece carries a production time of 21 months, with the team aiming to manufacture six guns a year from their range, which also includes the aforementioned side-by-side (the Legend), a stunning bar-in-wood design (the Signature) and an over-under currently in the final stages of development (the Legacy).

Actually, hold on... I do the Signature an injustice. It too adorns the table in front of me, and, with an unbroken river of finely figured walnut flowing from fore-end to butt, it is both utterly distinctive and elegant. But the Tribute

THE SIGNATURE

Gauge: 12, 20 and to order

Barrel length: 28" as standard, or to order

Choke: To order

Lock/Trigger: Single triggerplate

Stock: Straight-hand or semi-pistol grip

Weight: 5.75lb

Production time: 18 months

Price: From £48,600 (ex.VAT)

– so aptly named – steals the show.

Turning over the piece to track the cuts and chases of the scroll, I see that the triggerplate bears the serial number 11502, a continuation of where Manton left off before his company went under in 1842, seven years on from his death. A beautiful touch that only a beautiful gun could fulfil.

Joseph Manton, a man renowned for his unrelenting pursuit of precision and perfection, would be proud. Proud of the passion. Proud of his lasting legacy. But mostly, proud that these three men are a cut from the same innovative cloth. The groundbreaking triple-barrelled Tribute has come to form via skilled hands and incredible robotic technology, but – as intended – the looks and design herald back to the great man himself. The godfather of British gunmaking returns.

www.josephmantonlondon.com

Contact Ian Spencer on +44(0)1440 821717

A pigeon grey area

Rupert Godfrey thinks further on the movement patterns of woodpigeons across Western Europe.

In the last issue, I pondered the reasons for the lack of woodies in my area of the South West, and the effect of the huge beechmast crop on their behaviour.

I write this at the end of November, wondering whether any significant numbers of birds will have arrived with us here in Wiltshire by the end of the shooting season.

There certainly have been some huge flocks on the move in the UK recently – the largest recorded sighting that I heard of was 202,000 strong (yes – over 200,000 in one location!) at Portskewtt, Gwent, heading south on November 5. These were counted in flocks, flying between 100 and 1,000 yards up, in a three-mile-wide corridor. Some of the flocks were up to 10,000 strong, and the flight was over before 10am. Where had these birds come from? They couldn't be Scandinavian birds blown off course, so they had flown down through Wales, across the Bristol Channel, and on to where?

Devon must be full of woodies by now,

unless they have flown on, over to France and down through the Pyrenees. Jason Turner, the ace pigeon Shot who lives near Lyme Regis, reported seeing large numbers heading west, as he does every year at the end of October, while George Stucley saw large flocks heading north across Dartmoor. His view is that they were simply gorging themselves on the beechmast, and then moving on.

Richard Lovell had large flocks on his patch, but they were very transient and never in the same place two days running (he only shot three days in October and November); while Philip Fussell, who always has an eye out for woodies, told me he'd seen the biggest lot of his life in early November – a flock of thousands – which he estimated to be about half a mile wide, flying high, en route somewhere and not looking to come down anytime soon.

Reading the online discussions about woodie movement – by birders, rather than shooters – there are two main threads which contradict each other: the fact that the vast majority of

birds ringed in the UK are found close to their original positions, and the huge migrations down from Sweden and Norway, through the Netherlands, into... where? As an example of this, over three million birds were counted flying down through Holland into Belgium on November 1 last year, though, looking at the counting map, there may have been extensive duplication of the recording of the bigger flocks (see Trekstellen.org for further info).

Given the French penchant for shooting just

“...the largest recorded sighting that I heard of was 202,000 strong at Portskewtt, Gwent...”

about anything, one could assume that if there were vast flocks of woodies passing through, there would be a lot of big bags shot in France, but one never hears of them. A contact of mine



who was shooting wild boar saw vast flocks of woodies on maize plots in Northern France last February – enough for a 300 – 400 bag, he estimated. Certainly there are pigeon shoots on the Pyrenean migration routes, but, again, no talk of big bags there. In the oak woods of Spain and Portugal, there are sometimes large numbers killed, but in all the days I've shot partridges in Spain, I've never seen a woodie in the bag.

I've seen a lot in the Royal Park at Aranjuez, about 30 miles south-east of Madrid, but these seem to be sedentary birds. I once helped run a partridge shoot only a few miles from there, and we grew quite a lot of cover crops. Though we occasionally saw a woodie, they never built-up as I hoped they would – I thought I'd shoot hundreds from the numbers there.

Interestingly, the birders' debates never mention wild food supplies, and the effect I'm sure these have on movement within the UK. Looking back through my records, it's no coincidence that good acorn and/or beechmast

years lead to a real reduction in pigeons killed. In the last 20 years, though, we've never had two consecutive good beechmast years – until this year (2014).

My personal view is that there is a large domestic population (five million breeding pairs is often quoted) which will move long distances internally to find food, and sometimes fly along the coast, giving the impression they may be coming from overseas. There is then also a quite separate large continental population that migrates from Scandinavia – which raises another question: why are they up there in the first place? – down into Iberia each year. And, some years, large numbers of these birds are blown off course by a strong easterly wind, ending up on the East Coast of Britain.

In conclusion, the only thing that I believe can be claimed categorically, is that there is far too little known, scientifically, about this iconic British bird, upon which so many sportsmen and women across the country rely for their shooting enjoyment.

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Ottoly, ottoly wonderful

Our man visits Otto's on the Grays Inn Road for a game lunch cooked with a French twist.

Marcus, my new but most highly revered editor, is proving a hard taskmaster. Not content with sending me forth to all corners of the Kingdom on your behalf to seek out gastronomic experiences on which to report, he likes to set me what he calls his 'little tasks', most recently to identify and interview the (in) famous blogger, Bowler Hats and Flat Caps.

This fine magazine is not the place for tales of derring-do, of espionage, of dead letter drops, secret meetings in parks, coded messages, invisible ink, one-time codes and, frankly, the significant physical risk to the person of your

correspondent – all of which were involved. David Frost had a far easier time pinning down Nixon than I did in first tracking down, then interviewing, the elusive Blogger. Even then, a guarantee of complete anonymity was an absolute condition.

As was the venue, for the only place he will eat when in, as I am required to describe it, "this part of the world" is Otto's, in a nondescript, nay anonymous, part of Grays Inn Road in the no man's land between Holborn and King's Cross. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the exterior of Otto's might, too, be described as anonymous (German-born Otto? Ex-Stasi perhaps?

Utterly wrong – formerly of Stringfellows and La Tour d'Argent, he proved the most delightful and captivating

host), but within lies a temple to epicurea and to epicuria. Full of wondrous instruments of culinary creativity and pleasure, notably the antique, but well-used pressés de canard and homard, plush red banquettes, pictures of Marilyn and Brigitte, busts, empty bottles of extraordinary wines – certainly an eclectic mixture but all, perhaps, indicative of the passion this extraordinary man, Otto, brings to his restaurant.

Otto's is a classic, unashamedly old-fashioned and quite, quite wonderful French restaurant, the menu home to great dishes like confit goose terrine with foie gras, wild mushroom risotto and lobster bisque. And such treats as bouillabaisse

traditionnelle, limousin veal, filet de boeuf and just one of Otto's signature dishes, traditional French tartare préparé à la table with optional supplements of pan-fried foie gras or Oscietra caviar.

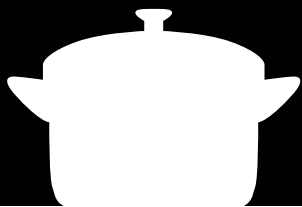
Charged only with

eating game, I left that treat for another visit, but the Blogger described the trolley arriving at the table, laden with hand-cut steak, bowls of raw eggs, cornichons, parsley and moutarde, mixed to order into simply exquisite classic tartare.

Arguing that as snails have to be hunted, they can be classed as game, I could not resist the ravioles d'escargots, fresh ravioli of snails marinated in Chablis. And what delicious game they proved! I then chose perdreau (partridge) rôti en cocotte (interestingly, as well as being a small dish, a cocotte is also a fashionable prostitute – a subject perhaps best left unexplored) off the bone avec more foie gras, wild mushrooms and Madeira jus. I do like game off the bone but, although I always shoot my quarry in the head, others are not so accurate and the odd broken bone is an occupational hazard.

Bowler Hats and Flat Caps is 'an everyday story of country life and city life', an everyday





Steak tartare

“Otto’s is a classic, unashamedly old-fashioned and quite, quite wonderful French restaurant...”

story, that is, of city folk getting tangled up in the strange ways of country sports and country sportspersons, and usually coming off worst. The Blogger’s astute observations, whether of Sir Frank Weobley confiding in the beater of his expectation of a knighthood: “not for myself, of course, but nice for Mrs Weobley to be a Lady”, or of sniggering pheasants; of the picker-up’s smothered giggle and, in pretense of looking for a claimed bird, ducking behind the hedge for a quick fag; the estate agent arriving on a grouse moor in a gold-lined white Range Rover Sport, offer an entertaining read second only to this magazine.

The Blogger enjoins his reader: “no mud or frost or downpours will incommode you; join me in a warm and comfortable chair, a magnificent view over a city street which, with a little imagination might just turn itself into

trees; but in the distance will be the sound of sticks on trees, rocketing pheasants, whimpering spaniels. And closer at hand you may just pick up the mutterings of tall stories, rude jokes, astonishing gossip, and amazing excuses, as yet again the sporting season begins.”

Saddle of hare was not on the menu last week but, again, the Blogger described the pleasure of perfectly cooked meat accompanied by a mulled pear and redcurrant sauce. I did persuade the Blogger’s minder to order (and to share) the roast Bresse chicken, the breast and legs served as separate courses, the former with morel sauce, girolles and French beans, the legs on a few salad leaves. Bresse chickens are protected by the status of Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée, prized for their “gamey depths of flavour yet fine tender flesh and delicious aromas”, a description this humble wordsmith could not better.

The Blogger, that rural James Bond, is clearly a favoured customer, for Otto simply brought wine he thought appropriate: a 2010 Meursault ‘Les Tillet’, a Vosne-Romanée 2006 ‘Maizieres’ and a 2004 Chateau Raymond-Lafon sauternes were all perfect choices. Another time, a dish of smoked sturgeon with more caviar, a soft poached egg and curry sabayon was simply

placed before us as an amuse-bouche! And, finally, again not that we had ordered it, it just appeared, apple tarte tatin, vanilla ice cream and crème anglaise, spectacularly flambé au calvados.

Classic cooking, done very, very well. Staggering from Otto’s most wonderful establishment, the best lunch of my year onboard, and promising the earliest possible return, even entertaining the prospect of paying for it myself. Next stop, “up” north, to meet the Prince’s new Princess. Another roast partridge proved just how irresistible a combination a delicious, game, bird, can be.

www.ottos-restaurant.com

www.bowlerhatsandflatcaps.blogspot.com



Esturgeon fumé



A splendid partridge dish



Unapologetically old-fashioned

Guest chef



Colin McGurran

It's not just fancy cooking that makes Colin McGurran's food stand out – almost all of the ingredients he uses in his kitchen at Winteringham Fields are grown, reared or foraged by him and his brigade of chefs, as Marcus Janssen discovered.

How would you spend your very last £200? “I withdrew my last £200 and bought a labrador puppy,” says chef Colin McGurran. “I was on the cusp of losing everything and I knew that the one thing the bank wouldn't take from me was a dog.” I had only just met Colin, and I was already warming to him.

As it happens, through sheer tenacity and determination, he did manage to turn his ailing hotel business around and sell it a few years later for a profit. But, although that labrador puppy is now an old boy, you can tell that he hasn't forgotten what it was like to have his back up against a wall. “At the time it was hellish,” he admits, “I had put everything I had, my entire life savings, into that business but I made so many

mistakes along the way that I ended up having to sell my soul to keep it afloat. I refer to it now as my time at Fawlty Towers, but if I did it all over again, I wouldn't change a thing – without that experience, I probably wouldn't be where I am today.”

Fast forward to 2015 and Colin now owns and runs one of the most highly regarded and successful fine dining restaurants in the north of England and is about to open a new pub nearby. With three AA rosettes to his name, his big break came in 2012 when the BBC invited him to take part in the Great British Menu. In his first



attempt, his 'Quail in the Woods' starter, which was described by Richard Corrigan as "utter deliciousness in its eating", made it to the final banquet, a feat he repeated again in 2014 with a World War One themed dessert. He has, by anyone's standards, come a very long way since those days of serving all you can eat buffets just to keep his head above water. "Part of my success can definitely be attributed to my experience at Fawlty Towers," he says with a smile. "Not only did it toughen me up and make me a lot more resilient and a bit more ruthless, but in a strange way, it reminded me of why I became a chef in the first place. I had to get back to what I love doing – proper cooking."

After selling the business that almost bled him dry, Colin purchased Winteringham Fields in late-2005 with the view to creating a restaurant with a difference. Nine years later, and I think it's fair to say that he has more than achieved that goal. Not only has he established a reputation for outstanding and innovative cuisine, but much of the produce that features on his highly acclaimed seasonal tasting menu comes directly to his kitchen from eight acres of fields, hedgerows and woodlands that he and his brigade of chefs look after.

FROM CHEF WHITES TO WELLIES

"It all started off with a few chickens," he explains. "I really wanted my own fresh eggs for the eggs benedict on my breakfast menu, and before we knew it, we were producing everything that went into our full English breakfast – the eggs, bacon, sausages, black pudding, tomatoes and grilled apple. It was so rewarding that we decided to take it a step further and grow our own vegetables for our lunch and dinner menus." Nowadays, Colin and his staff are responsible for growing carrots, leeks, broccoli, cauliflowers, four different types of cabbages, rhubarb, parsnips, potatoes, beetroot, sweetcorn, courgettes and pumpkins. And they also have polytunnels for their herbs, micro cresses, tomatoes and cucumbers, they have their own chickens, pigs, sheep, goats and beehives, and they make their own butter and cheese. "Everything is organic, and we are as close to self-sufficient as we can possibly get."

Every morning Colin and his chefs go out into the fields, woods, chicken coups and polytunnels to harvest, gather and forage for the ingredients they need for the day. "If something is your own, you will treat it with



a lot more respect, he says. "People ask me what makes my lamb so good and I will tell them it is because it has been loved by me! But, of course, we are chefs, not farmers, so we have had to experiment and learn by trial and error. Some things have worked, others really haven't," he admits. "But the more time you spend outdoors, tending the fields, looking after your own livestock or foraging for wild ingredients, the more you learn from nature. For instance, I had an excellent crop of elderberries one year, but noticed that they were being decimated by woodpigeons. So, I decided to combine the two and served the woodpigeon with a jus made with the elderberries. It was a perfect combination and our customers loved it."

Another major challenge is the natural variations in abundance and availability through the seasons. February and March pose the greatest challenge as the ground is often frozen solid in North Lincolnshire. "In the depths of winter we have to be really savvy and plan ahead. Of course, we do have to order in some fresh produce, but we always ensure that it comes from local growers who share our values. From October through to February, we also struggle to produce enough of our own lamb and pork, so we use game instead." ➡



A RESTAURANT WITH A SHOOT

Colin thoroughly enjoys the bucolic atmosphere of shoot days, although he doesn't pull the trigger himself. Yet. "I like to go beating and work my dogs," he says. "This year, I went on a grouse shoot for the first time in County Durham and absolutely loved it. With the heather in bloom, breathtaking views and the wonderful camaraderie between the Guns, beaters and gundog handlers, it was a magical experience. I brought back 80 grouse to use in the kitchen and I am definitely keen to take up shooting in the future – it's just a matter of finding the time as I am kept so busy with everything else!"

But Colin has come up with a brilliant arrangement with a local shoot syndicate whereby the release pens are located on the land he manages and, when the birds are released in autumn, his organic root crops and sweetcorn provides them with excellent holding cover. In return, the Guns supply him with as many pheasants and partridges as he needs.

The Winteringham Fields ethos is all about utilising what is in season and trying to get the very best out of it. "I just want to take each ingredient and turn it into something that I want to eat myself," says Colin. "My motto is comfort first, refinement second and presentation third. It's all about the natural



ingredient. For instance, we serve pure, unadulterated carrot juice at breakfast – nothing added, nothing removed – and it is astounding how good it tastes. To me, that is a perfect lesson from Mother Nature: food doesn't need to be complicated. That carrot took five months to grow – nature has done the hard work, so why would you try and change that?"

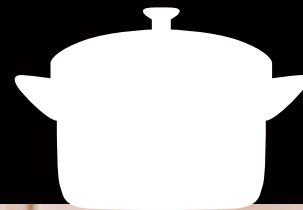
And in terms of Colin's cooking style, with a background in classic French cuisine (he trained at the two Michelin-starred Domain des Hauts de Loire in Onzain, France), he makes no bones of the fact he is quite traditional in the methods he uses. "I am happy to use modern cooking methods if they genuinely enhance a dish," he says. "For instance, I like to use water baths to cook certain fish – but, honestly, I think the molecular cookery that was brought into

vogue by the likes of Heston Blumenthal and Ferran Adrià is on the way out. If you look at places like Noma in Copenhagen (rated as the best restaurant in the world), there is definitely a trend towards utilising ingredients in their natural form, and a return to more traditional, proper cooking methods."

And as soon I tasted the venison dish that Colin had cooked especially for *Fieldsports*, I silently thanked the gods of gastronomy for traditional cooking methods. In the words of Richard Corrigan, it was quite simply utter deliciousness in its eating and, as I forlornly looked down at my empty plate a few minutes later, it dawned on me that I now know what I would spend my last £200 on – dinner for two at Winteringham Fields.

www.winteringhamfields.co.uk

Caissé roast wild Balmoral venison, pressing of potato and Gruyère, braised red cabbage and venison sausage



Serves 2

INGREDIENTS

Venison loin

300g venison loin
10g unsalted butter
1g thyme
3g garlic
Salt & pepper

Venison sausages (optional)

1kg venison shoulder (minced)
200g pork fat (minced)
100g panko breadcrumbs
20g fine sea salt
5g nutmeg
5g cinnamon
250ml water
Pig intestines (approx. 1 metre)

Celeriac purée

500g celeriac (finely diced)
100g unsalted butter
300ml whole milk
100ml double cream
4g fine sea salt

Potato pavé

1kg chipper potatoes (washed, peeled and thinly sliced)
200g Gruyère cheese (finely grated)
100g unsalted butter (melted)
10g sea salt

Creamed red cabbage

250g red cabbage (grated)
50g white onion (chopped)
100g carrots (grated)
50ml double cream
25g unsalted butter
5ml vegetable oil
Salt & pepper

METHOD

Venison loin

Sear the venison loin in a pan, colour quickly to seal all the juices and then add the butter, thyme,



garlic, salt and pepper and cook for a further two minutes.

Place in a preheated oven at 180°C until the loin reaches 52°C in the centre when checked with a temperature probe. Rest for 20 minutes and then divide the loin into four portions.

Venison sausages

Mix all the ingredients and, using the sausage pipe on the sausage machine, fill the pigs intestines, twisting at 3" intervals.

To serve, sear the sausage in a pan until golden on the outside (the sausage should be a little pink when cut into).

Celeriac purée

Melt the butter in a pan and add the celeriac.

Cook until the celeriac is soft and then add the milk, cream and salt.

Blitz the mixture in a blender and then pass through a sieve or chinois to leave a smooth purée.

Potato pavé

Line a baking tray with baking parchment and layer the potato in a rough square shape (approx. 30cm square), ensuring that each layer is brushed with the melted butter. Season and evenly sprinkle over some of the cheese. Repeat until all potatoes have been used. Bake at 160°C for 40 minutes. When cooked, press between two baking trays and keep in the fridge until needed. When required, slice the pavé into a rectangle before frying in a pan with a little oil until golden.

Creamed red cabbage

On a low heat, sweat the chopped onions in oil for four minutes. Next, add the carrots and sweat for

a further two minutes.

Add the grated cabbage and cook for five minutes, ensuring all the vegetables are not colouring (adjust the heat accordingly).

Add the cream and heat through, bringing to the boil. Season to taste.

To serve

Glaze the sliced venison loin with a little oil and season well with Maldon sea salt.

Dot the purée onto the left-hand-side of the plate and then lay the sliced venison in the middle of the plate (two slices per portion). Add one sausage per portion underneath the loin.

Reheat the creamed cabbage if required and add a quenelle to the right of the venison loin.

Finally, add the reheated potato pavé to the bottom of the plate. Bon appétite!

When in Rhône...



Matching wine to game, with James Goodhart.

Having read Colin McGurran's Guest Chef feature, you will no doubt want to book a table. It's an inspiring dish, full of rich, earthy flavours with just the right balance of sweetness. In terms of wine pairings, venison doesn't like much tannin, so the first step is to set aside the big tannic wines and also avoid those big high alcohol numbers which will just overpower the dish. This fabulous recipe deserves succulent wines with great balance, bringing depth of flavour, a little spice and sweetness to compliment and work with the dish. You could go for a mature red Burgundy or a Pinot Noir from New Zealand. However, on this occasion we are going to discover Rhône and the diverse flavours which will make this match really sing.

There's a fabulous diversity of wine found in the Rhône Valley – divided into two regions with distinct viticulture. A mere 40 miles long, northern Rhône accounts for less than five per cent of the wines from this region. With hot summers, cold winters and much precipitation, the terroir is dominated by steep hillsides, making for terraced vineyards which alleviate soil erosion and retain the warmth of the sun. This is the birthplace of the Syrah grape (also known as Shiraz) from where you will find delicious full-bodied, savoury red wines. There are many famous appellations including the world-renowned Hermitage, as well as Crozes Hermitage and Côte Rôtie.

Progressing southwards, following the Rhône River, the valley widens and the climate becomes more Provençal in style, with long, warm Mediterranean summers and mild winters. Here the Mistral wind plays its role – rainfall is significantly less than in the north – and wild herbs cover the landscape, known as garrigue. Here you find one of the most well-known appellations, Côtes de Rhône AOC, which accounts for over 60 per cent of Rhône wine. The Grenache grape leads the pack and forms the foundation of this region's most popular blends. But blending is practised everywhere,

with 18 permitted grapes to Châteauneuf-du-Pape where you can find some of the best wines in southern Rhône.

CROZES HERMITAGE, LE ROUVRE, YANN CHAVE 2012 – £20.99

Yann Chave produces gloriously aromatic Syrah. His Crozes Hermitage is organically produced, aged principally in stainless steel vats, and is one of the very best examples of the appellation. Le Rouvre is a selection of the oldest vines from a splendidly sited parcel in the southern Rhône, aged in 500-litre demi-muids. It combines ripe, spicy aromas with vivid fruit and a dense texture. Slightly smoky nose with abundant black fruits and spice. Fantastic structure on the palate, with seductive, almost velvety black fruits, added blackcurrant purée with interwoven spice that flows onto a long distant finish. Drink now to 2020.



GIGONDAS, 'LA GILLE' PERRIN ET FILS 2009 – £17.99

Produced by the Perrin family of Château de Beaucastel fame, the domaine leads the way in natural wine making, consistently producing long-lived classics that are amongst the finest in the world. Here in Gigondas, the vineyards are protected from the Mistral by the Dentelle Mountains, producing some delightful earthy, aromatic wines. La Gille is bright ruby red with notes of cherries, thyme and blackberries. Medium bodied, it has a lovely elegance and purity. Rounded and full in the mouth with an abundance of black fruit and crushed plums with undertones of espresso and dark chocolate onto a long finish. Drink now to 2018.

LIRAC, DOMAINE LAFOND ROC EPINE 2012 – £11.99

Attention to detail is the key at Pascal Lafond's estate. Based in Tavel, most of his red vines form a single holding straddling the Côtes du Rhône and Lirac appellations, although 3.5 hectares of Châteauneuf-du-Pape have also been added in recent years. All the reds are fermented in stainless steel vats before maturation in small oak barrels and larger foudres. A blend of 70 per cent Grenache and 30 per cent Syrah, this wine has a nose of spiced black fruits with luscious cherry notes. Soft, round style with loads of bramble and loganberries fused with soft spice. Slightly meaty in style with good purity. Drink now to 2019.

FIELDSPORTS OFFER...

If you would like to try these wines, we have put together a special tasting case comprised of four bottles of each wine for £195.00 (inc VAT) with free delivery to UK mainland (saving over £20). To take advantage of this special offer please order by phone and quote "Fieldsports" when ordering. Offer available whilst stocks last or until March 31, 2015.

Bon Coeur Fine Wines Ltd.
www.bcfw.co.uk
Tél. +44 (0)1765 688200

Rising star — again!

When we told friends that we were going to North Yorkshire for a couple of days, the response was ‘where are you shooting?’ It was, after all, the end of November. “We’re not – it’s strictly R&R.”

If they were shocked it didn’t show. “So where are you staying?”

“The Star at Harome,” I responded.

“Have you been – it’s excellent?” We hadn’t.

Just two miles from Helmsley (Pheasant Grand Central), The Star could be described as a pub with rooms, but that does it a serious disservice. The area has a number of first rate hotels and restaurants, but we are talking about an establishment with a stand-out reputation.

Not that it hasn’t had its moments. How many restaurants could survive closure through novovirus, a marriage break-up and the loss of a Michelin star? Andrew Pern, The Star chef/proprietor, has had this and more, and yet he has won the Michelin award back and has also opened a 130-seater sister

restaurant in York called The Star Inn The City. Plus there’s a new lady with whom he has a new baby.

The dramas were clearly not on his wish list – each could have seriously damaged his trade and reputation. Not a bit of it. If anything, he has become busier than ever.

But we are talking about an overnight success that started 19 years ago. This was a business built to last. It was 1996 when Andrew and ex-wife Jacquie took on The Star, then a small run-down village pub. By 2004 they had not only restored the thatched roof building, but nine fabulous bedrooms had been created from old farm buildings, literally over the road. They also bought and restored Harome’s other pub, The Pheasant Hotel (now owned by Jacquie).

All of this was made possible by the food on offer. Andrew is self-taught; his mother was diagnosed with MS when he was nine years old, so he ventured into the kitchen. He discovered Robert Carrier’s cookbooks and the rest is history. While still at primary school he began making dishes such as woodcock



terrines, stroganoffs and pâtés. He studied catering at Scarborough College and then went on to Paris. He was in his element, and by the age of 22 he was head chef at the Milburn Arms in Rosedale, North Yorks.

By now he had a style of his own and an ever-growing following. He says it is simply down to great food cooked well. He makes good use of the game meats so readily available in this part of the world, although his signature

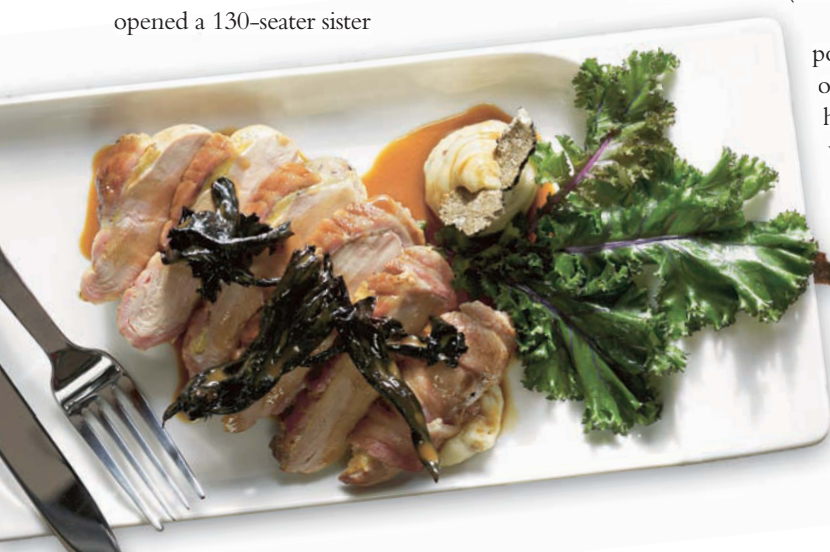
dish for many years was foie gras and black pudding, typically bringing cheap and expensive ingredients together.

His skill also took him into television where he appeared on the Great British Menu.

Flair is a key word, both in food and accommodation. The bedrooms in Cross House Lodge have been imaginatively put together, as has the hugely comfortable lounge area. Not forgetting the Wheelhouse, where breakfast is served at a big 18-seat round table, which is perfect as a private dining room for shoot parties, of which there are quite a lot. Meanwhile, outside, the North York Moors beckon.

So just two days out of a long shooting season made it a welcome battery charger. Great food and great levels of comfort – I also earned a pan-full of brownie points.

MB



THE FIRE IN THE WINTER HEATHER

Uncertainty and fear of a severely left wing political programme have shunted Scotland's rural operation into quicksand, says Michael Wigan.



Scotland's First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, raised the fiery cross and set alight the heather with her programme of administration for the new Scottish government. The last one, under Alex Salmond, lost the Independence Referendum capturing 38 per cent of the electorate's support.

Faced by appalling problems in its health service, a below par educational record compared to the rest of the UK, and lacklustre employment figures, Ms Sturgeon has decided that the solution is to attack owners of land.

They are to pay rates for the privilege of using land for sport, their land will be removed if deemed to be managed 'unsustainably', and the Napoleonic code of division amongst all family members is to replace primogeniture, thereby fragmenting land units. In all likelihood, landowners will be restricted in management

by Scottish Natural Heritage and, in case they want to exit and sell, various potential buyers such as non-EU companies will be de-barred from bidding.

Ms Sturgeon has opted to attack mythic issues rather than real ones. It is cheaper. Assailing rural businesses can be window-dressed as social reform; failing to mend the health service cannot. Whether the citizens of Scotland will really agree that the biggest problem facing them and their families is who owns the ridge beyond the ridge is doubtful. Good soundbites often have a limited impact-time.

The angrier land reformists may relish the plan's nasty twist: rates levied on sporting use will beef up the hungry Land Fund. This is what is used to buy land for communities. In other words, landowner businesses will

fund their own replacements. Yet again, the programme for government is centralisation not localism; locally-levied rates will be repatriated to Edinburgh.

There is another kink. SNH will dictate deer culls. They can inflate the Land Fund by ordering more deer to be shot, triggering higher sporting rates. Management of rural land in Scotland will become a liability.

'Sustainability', the measure by which all landholders must abide, is to be decided by government. Government thereby can throw out anyone it wants.

The person who will supervise all this is the new Minister for the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, Aileen McLeod. Born in 1971, Ms McLeod has apparently never had a job outside politics and was elected into the Scottish Parliament only three years ago

in 2011. She was a list MSP, in other words not directly elected but proportionately as part of the overall vote and put forward by her party – a peculiarity of Scotland's system. Her official biography mentions no experience of rural business or rural life. Echoing the text of the press release, she says she wants, "a fairer and more equitable distribution of land in Scotland".

At this juncture, no-one knows how the consultation and resulting legislation will pan out. The Parliament is already sitting on recommendations written by radical land reformists. The proposals so far announced merely reiterate these recommendations.

Taxing sporting users will substantially increase costs and make balancing the books harder. Owners will pay more to function and presumably sporting tenants will pay more to come to Scotland. Anglers, shooters and stalkers will have to dig deeper when they cross the border.

Had the Parliament wanted to inform itself about the economics of sporting use, it would have looked at the dozen or so community-owned estates which have started as primarily sporting entities.

There is a pattern. Early rejection of stalking and shooting as acceptable uses of land has been followed by a realisation that other ways of earning money are limited. Sport, having been dismantled, has been restored. Gamekeepers dismissed have been re-employed. Letting sport has not always worked financially because community owners lacked experience of the sale product and had no relationship with the established customer base. This has led to low-cost sporting offers, and sometimes stalking without a stalker. Stalking amateurs have, in effect, been used to perform deer culls on the cheap.

If the model for future ownership in the Scottish hills is to be communities, an honest government might have profiled how these have worked. Embarrassment prevents this. In the week Ms Sturgeon's focus on landowners was announced, the financial collapse of the community-owned Isle of Gigha estate also hit the headlines. At one time the flagship community-owned estate, run on sound business principles, the trust now has debts of

£3 million. Along with many others, the Land Fund will be asked to keep the latest fatality afloat. Failures of community ownership, which are mocked at local level, must at any cost be kept from the wider public.

They were unpopular from the start. Why should one set of people be given land and buildings and not another? That uncomfortable question has been smothered. The Scottish media has portrayed community take-overs romantically, as old wrongs being redressed.

The organisation representing landowners, Scottish Land and Estates, has reacted sharply to the focus of Ms Sturgeon's new administration. Chairman David Johnstone has pointed out that estates have often been drivers of sustainable

"Much of this will raise eyebrows outside Scotland. There will be wonderment that Scotland has drifted leftwards so fast and so far."

development. He asks: "In what circumstances is it alright to force someone to sell their home and business?"

Owners of rural property in Scotland face a murky climate. Property investment will attract green-eyed neighbours, stirring bids to take over landholdings under 'Community Right to Buy'. Logically, owners no longer have an incentive to improve their properties. They would merely become more desirable targets for seizure. Development of more sport will attract more tax. So, go easy there too. If they do something which a central Scotland land commission decides is embraced by the woolly term 'unsustainable', owners, Scotland's rural stakeholders, could be forced to sell-up.

How much for? The value is decided by the government valuer. So, the buyer decides the sale price. If the effect of land reform is, as it pronounces it aims to be, to destroy previous values in traditional sporting land, and valuations are based on previous sales, owners could be ejected for a pittance.

Much of this will raise eyebrows outside Scotland. There will be wonderment that Scotland has drifted leftwards so fast and so far. Some of the proposals which will be waved through the Scottish Parliament, in

the absence of a second or revising chamber, will be bounced back when challenged in law and require to be re-drafted. This has happened before. Scottish constitutional thinkers are talking about the need for a senate, or at least some body to moderate what is often parliamentary operation resembling an amateur theatrical.

Inward investment will simply go elsewhere, as the business sector has been quick to say. Ms Sturgeon's early remarks, one by one, attacked business. She was obliged smartly to row back. But she marked her card.

Commentators looking at all this from a more universal point, for example in the *Financial Times*, have concluded that

Scotland is entering a dark tunnel. Property values prove it. Aside from productive upper-end farms, much land has become un-saleable. Estates and big country houses attract no interest; some agents have sold nothing substantial for two years. The same holds true for

many surrounding businesses, such as hotels, smallholdings and guesthouses.

International markets, seemingly a distant concept to the new government, react instantly. The Forestry Commission presented for sale a block of Sutherland forestry at Rosal in summer 2014. Two syndicates involving seven individuals expressed interest. Within 24 hours of the publication of the land reform review, all seven had ducked out. How much land would any individual be allowed to own? Why buy land which could be taken away?

The result? The property is being re-marketed with some icing on the cake, like a guaranteed transportation route off the public road to get the timber to market. It won't be enough. If a community owner can be found as a buyer of last resort, there will be need for financial support. What would have been money for the state will be ongoing cost. The price for driving out private capital will ultimately be paid by Central Belt taxpayers.

What was said by land agent at-the-time, Niall Graham-Campbell, about the introduction of community ownership has proved increasingly true: "They will exchange an owner with capital for one without any."

The lesson is shortly to be learned.



FISHING

CROATIAN EXPLORATORY

David Beanland travels to northern Croatia, where he experiences mixed fortunes in his quest for grayling and brown trout.

The Source of
the Kupa River

The Kupa is a broad river, an effective border between Slovenia and Croatia. It wells out of a large, limestone sinkhole, where grayling ghost the misty blue depth. In its subsequent kilometres, the river becomes shallower, assuming a greener tone, but the grayling remain. They outnumber the trout. For a little over 30 Euros you can fish a 2km stretch about a mile from the Kupa's source. Tickets are available at the Risnjak National Park restaurant. It might be cheaper to pay in the national currency, the Kuna. Naively, when I crossed the border, I'd forgotten that Croatia is not yet in the Eurozone.

Much more fishing can be had further downstream, at Brod na Kupi. I was told by the owner of the Hotel Mance that tickets were only sold to guests staying there, but he was prepared to make an exception in my case. I'm not sure that's true, for I believe the fishing rights belong to an angling organisation. Anyway, my 35 Euros allowed me to explore a lot of the Kupa, the whole of the Kupica (a 3km tributary) and the little Curak (7km long). It's as well that there's a lot of water to fish, because the angling pressure is high. The Hotel Mance is conveniently situated within sight of the border crossing and close to all three rivers.

Fishermen from Italy and Austria are regular visitors and there was a small group of Belgian anglers staying there. I had chosen to lodge about 20km away, at Gina's, a very welcoming and comfortable B&B in Kupjak. It meant I was well placed to fish rivers further south in Croatia, like the Kamacnik, Dobra, Vitunjica, or the more distant and more famous Gacka.

At the junction of the Kupica and Curak, there's a big pool that was delicately ringed by rises. It seemed to be the right place to



begin. I waded carefully by the bank and cast over grayling I could see wafting over the gravel bed. Nothing moved to the dry fly. Either they'd been targeted earlier by other anglers, or they were inured to artificial lures.

At the top of the pool, where a small weir and a scattering of rocks broke the flow into a bubbly tangle of currents, I noticed a large, dark shape, but it showed no interest in the flies I offered.

The Curak is the sort of river I'm used to: small, rocky and hugged by trees. I fished it expectantly and left disappointed. A few days later, I ventured further upstream, towards the gorge. It's a more challenging section with deeper pools – one of which produced a small trout. The Kupica also yielded very little.

It was the Kupa that provided most of my fish. On my first visit, I explored the downstream section and found a lovely flow of water a short drive from Brod na Kupi. There was a wide, shallow pool above, which accelerated over stones into a deep run over gravel. It looked like the perfect place for a shoal of grayling. Not that I had much hope: I'd caught nothing and there was no fly life. This is odd, given that northern Croatia relies mainly on forestry and has very little arable land. You would expect the meadows and bankside vegetation to harbour lots of insects whose lives are untroubled by pesticides. The apparent lack of large hatches might explain why terrestrial imitations worked so well for

me. The Turck's Tarantula variant which had proved irresistible in Slovenia also succeeded further south. Casting at random over this promising current, I caught two fine, muscular grayling. The Kupa, I'm sure, holds bigger fish, but, after a hard day's fishing, I was pleased with my catch which came minutes before the rain.

I was keen to explore some of the smaller rivers to the south. Gina made a few telephone calls and came up with the Kamacnik near Vrbovsko. She discovered that it was fishable above the motorway viaduct. Below that point, there'd been an extensive fall of trees that blocked the stream. Winter ice had been so heavy that lots of woodland had been affected, both in Croatia and Slovenia.

The cobbles of Vrbovsko lead to the Flash Café where, for 20

Euros, you can get a day ticket. A road opposite the café leads to the junction of the Kamacnik with the River Dobra. Alongside a restaurant runs a path which takes walkers upstream. After a little more than half a kilometre, you reach the motorway viaduct. My approach was less orthodox, involving a drive back through Vrbovsko and along a very minor road. I asked a woman the way to the river and she got her husband to help. With him in the car, I was directed down a track which ended in a meadow. In fact, the track was mostly meadow. Luckily there was some firm ground where I could park. He pointed to the wooded valley, refused my offer of a lift home, and disappeared.

Even above the viaduct there were trees to clamber over, but fishable water was visible. ➡



FISHING

The problem was, so was I. The Kamacnik is narrow, mostly shallow and very clear. Its trout are startlingly alert. My only chance of catching one was to fish the faster, broken water. The Tarantula winkled one out almost immediately, but then I struggled to entice another. Only when I came to a weir did I believe I might do better. And I did: three trout around 10" each were taken from directly below the fall.

Returning to the car, I was about to cross the stream when I saw a narrow, quicker section I hadn't fished. That yielded a 12" trout, a beautiful, golden fish. Some of Eastern Europe's rivers have golden trout; this looked like one, but I discovered later the golden version is really a variant of the rainbow trout (which mine wasn't) and California's state fish.

Given the size of the Kamacnik and the nervousness of its trout, I was glad I was the only angler. I could fish all the likely places and wade where I wanted. The Curak is similar – you want it to yourself. The problem is that there's no beat system, no booking office. You have to hope no-one else is there. With the bigger rivers, like the Kupa, it doesn't matter so much. You simply drive to a stretch which is fisherman-free, but even then you can't be certain that no-one has cast over it minutes before you.

Two days later, I was back at

Brod na Kupa. First, I explored the Kupica and Curak a little further, and so it was late afternoon when I turned my attention to the Kupa. This time I tried the upstream section, driving past a few anglers before I reached an appealing pool.

As I parked the car, three children ran across the road – members of the gypsy family I had been told about. Like little insects, their eyes ran over me, the car, and its contents. They asked to get in and show me where the big fish were, but I just smiled, shook my head, and drove on.

Before long, I found an interesting spot where a limestone shelf provided a small cascade

at right angles to the main flow. Effectively, there were three distinct parts to fish. I began exploring the current to my left. There was a slight rise which I guessed indicated a grayling. It came readily to the Tarantula, as did another, also about a pound in weight. From the next section, a third grayling took the fly. The most alluring portion of the pool was that main flow against the opposite bank, but often such places, to the angler's surprise, yield nothing. I could feel doubt growing as I covered the rope of water carefully. Another handsome grayling reassured me a little.

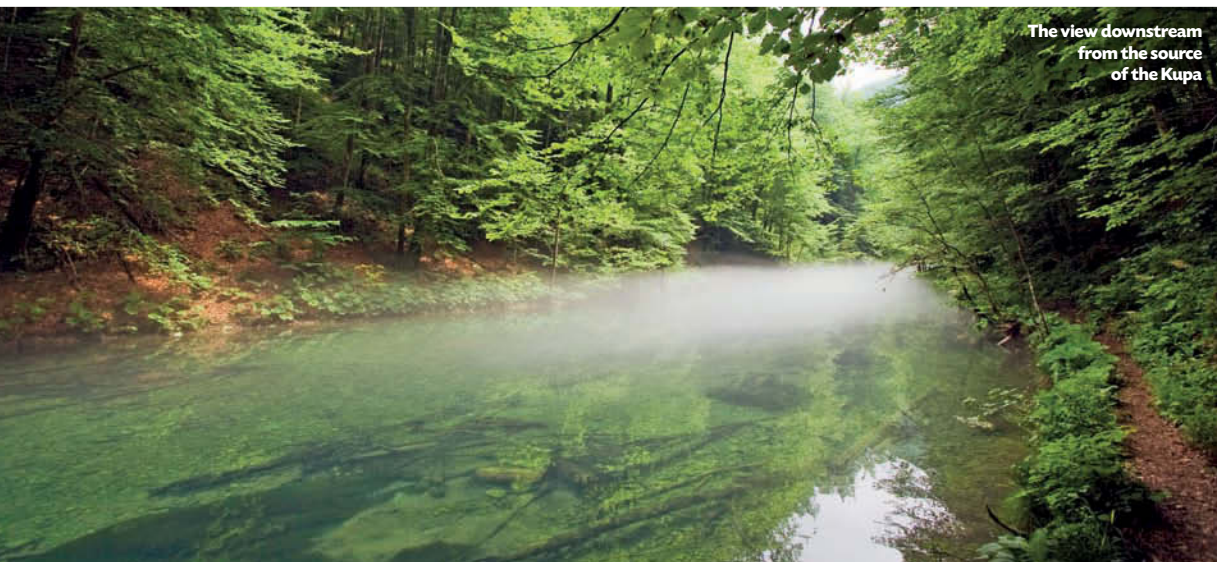
There had been a few large duns flickering about, one of which

looked like a Yellow May. The only approximate pattern I had was a bushy, deer hair creation. I let that wander slowly over a relatively calm part of the pool. It was very deep, and suddenly, from the green gloom, came a nice trout of a fraction over a pound.

Further upstream there was a long pool in which the better fish were in the drop-off zone, visible as wavering shadows. Towards the far bank, the riverbed rose like a gravel ramp. A few grayling were rising there to the odd insect. It was easy angling – no immediate snags to trouble my casting and several targets to aim for. None of the big grayling the Kupa is known for, but I enjoyed tricking and playing those that I hooked.

That is the pleasure of fishing in Eastern Europe. The languages are nobbly with consonants and difficult to learn, the scenery is different with its mountains and dense forests, and so is the fauna (in northern Croatia there are bears, lynx and wolves). For the solo angler it's a challenge, but one which nourishes and stimulates. You should try it.

**"MY ONLY CHANCE OF
CATCHING ONE WAS
TO FISH THE FASTER,
BROKEN WATER."**



The view downstream
from the source
of the Kupa



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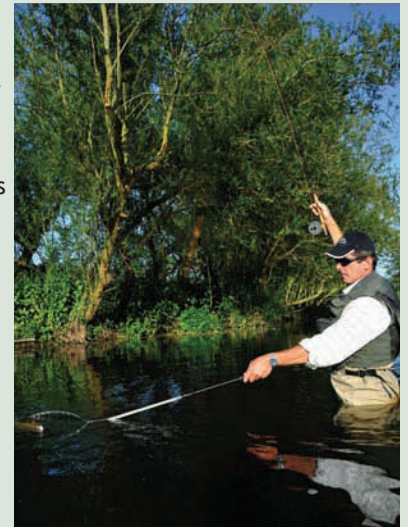
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An aerial photograph of a winding river in the Amazon rainforest, viewed from a small aircraft. The propeller of the plane is visible in the foreground, and the river flows through a dense, green forest. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds.

FISHING ADVENTURES

Adventures in the Emerald Forest

Matt Harris heads into the Amazon for a rumble in the jungle with one of the hardest-fighting freshwater species of fish he has ever done battle with.

Flying through a rain-storm
north of Manaus

As my three boys grow older, they grow cheekier by the day. When my teenage son, Tom, heard me discussing my next fly fishing adventure on the phone one evening, he couldn't help but rib the old man. "Cichlids? You're fishing for cichlids?" he chirruped. "Aren't they those little tiddlers you see in tropical fishtanks?"

Cichlids? No doubt you too picture some colourful but rather small, vulnerable-looking creatures, grinding out their long, meaningless lives as inmates in a tropical fish-tank.

But there are other cichlids out there.

Peacock bass are cichlids, and they are big, brutal assassins that are a million miles from those poor, wretched little creatures in the aquarium. Peacocks are big, broad-shouldered bully-boys that swagger around the waters of the Amazon jungle, looking for a fight. Splashed in a range of absurdly flamboyant colour-schemes, these

psychopathic brawlers are one of the world's iconic sport-fish. Smaller ones – the butterfly peacock genus in particular – hang around in huge packs, and can offer relentless and addictive action. Then there are the paca, an exquisitely coloured variety, mottled with creamy spots and famed for punching way above their weight. In fact, there are at least 15 varieties up and down the vast Amazon watershed to keep you busy. They're all great sport-fish, but the big daddies

the fish of a lifetime – are a genuine, if rare, possibility.

After three days at Agua Boa Lodge, I had been lucky. Using huge 10" giant trevally flies, I'd pulled out a succession of fish in the high teens, including fish of 19, 18½ and 18lb. I had no right to grumble, but, as yet another behemoth dragged the scales down to just 2lb shy of the magical mark, I started to suspect that the fishing gods were conspiring against me in my quest for a 20-pounder.

When I'd bemoaned my luck to lodge manager Carlos, he chided me: veteran peacock anglers go a lifetime without catching a fish of that size. I'd been lucky enough to

“The early dawn greets us with a pall of thick fog and we take extra care to look out for Rex, the vast, 18ft black caiman that frequents the dock...”

of the family are the tucunare – *Cichla temensis*. These are the real hoodlums, and the ones to target if you want to experience maximum thrills and spills with a fly rod.

Most tucunare frequent the murky, turbid waters that are so typical of the Amazon basin, but one river is different. The Rio Agua Boa, in the far northern extremities of the Amazon's vast watershed, is a rare gem. Its crystal-clear waters cascade down from the hills of Northern Roraima, close to the Venezuelan border, and, unless experiencing heavy rainfall, the river offers a very special experience. The local peacocks can be sight-fished as they range across the white sands that carpet the river's bed. And it gets better: the fish are very, very big.

At most lodges, a peacock bass of 10lbs is considered a real trophy. Forget it: at Agua Boa, fish this size don't even raise an eyebrow, and 15lb fish are caught regularly. Even 20-pounders – a veritable monster in peacock terms, and undoubtedly

pull out some whoppers, and I should be celebrating. However, as he passed me another delicious, icy caipirinha, Carlos suggested with a sly wink that he might just have a plan...

My guide Caboco and I are out at first light the next morning. The early dawn greets us with a pall of thick fog and we take extra care to look out for Rex, the vast, 18ft black caiman that frequents the dock, as we load the steely 10 weights into the boat. We push off into the white-out, and despite knowing the river like the back of his hand, Caboco is forced to take things slowly, weaving around the sand-bars in the opaque, grey-green mist.

There's an eerie quality to the dawn. The pale, watery sun appears briefly, flickering weakly through the mists, before receding again into the vast blank canvas of the fog. Ghostly impressions of the tree-lined banks loom momentarily before being lost again as we work our way slowly ➡

Amazon kingfishers are a common sight on the river



FISHING ADVENTURES

Matt Harris shows off a beautiful Surubi catfish, a rare catch on fly



upstream. We head north, tracing the serpentine curves of the river, pushing upstream in the cool air of the early morning. When Caboco cuts the engine to negotiate a sandbar with his paddle, I hear the bewitching music of the emerald forest – the cacophony of birdsong stretching off a million miles in every direction, and the shrieks of howler monkeys, far-off in the tree-tops.

As we press on upstream, the mists start to burn off. We watch a pair of huge jabiru storks flapping irritably at our approach, before clambering clumsily into the air and gliding away into the trees. A squadron of exquisitely painted macaws cruise overhead, and as we round a sharp hairpin in the river, a magical sight: a family of giant otters are frisking innocently, midstream.

Another wide bend, and there, up ahead, lazing on a sand-bank and bathing in the warmth of the early sunshine, a small caiman. As Caboco slows the boat, I study him through my long telephoto lens. Despite his size, this prehistoric little fellow is all menace. I watch him blink his wicked eyes and then reluctantly drag his lizard-like body into the cool waters.

On and on we go. Caboco has now abandoned his earlier caution,

and is rocketing along at full-tilt, confident that the sunshine is lighting up the stream and illuminating any potential hazards. The boat sends up a rooster-tail of spray, and egrets and herons lift off into the warm air. At the mouth of a huge lagoon, we catch a rare glimpse of a pair of freshwater dolphins, their broad pink flanks momentarily visible as they roll through the waters. The flat horizon of the jungle becomes punctuated by a series of jagged foothills, and the gradient of the river starts to steepen as we climb into the uplands of the river valley.

Finally, three long hours after leaving the dock, we arrive at the spot that Carlos has suggested might just produce a monster. Caboco cuts the motor and noses us into a narrow channel off of the main stream. Kingfishers and woodpeckers fizz by and, as Caboco paddles us up into the thick, overgrown bush, it is clear that no-one has been here for a long, long time. My guide goes to work with his machete, clearing a path through the dense foliage. Up ahead, a wide, shallow bar and a fallen tree threaten our progress, but somehow we manage to negotiate the obstructions, and glide quietly into the hidden lagoon.

Steam is rising in the searing

heat, and the rapidly climbing sun gives us perfect visibility in the shallow water. Just as Carlos predicted, the thickly weeded waters are not churning with peacocks – the lagoon is an oxbow, and is virtually completely cut-off from the main stream, except in the high waters of the rainy season, preventing access for peacocks for the majority of the time. But the lagoon has that special, indefinable quality that suggests that it just might be the place where a real leviathan could be lurking.

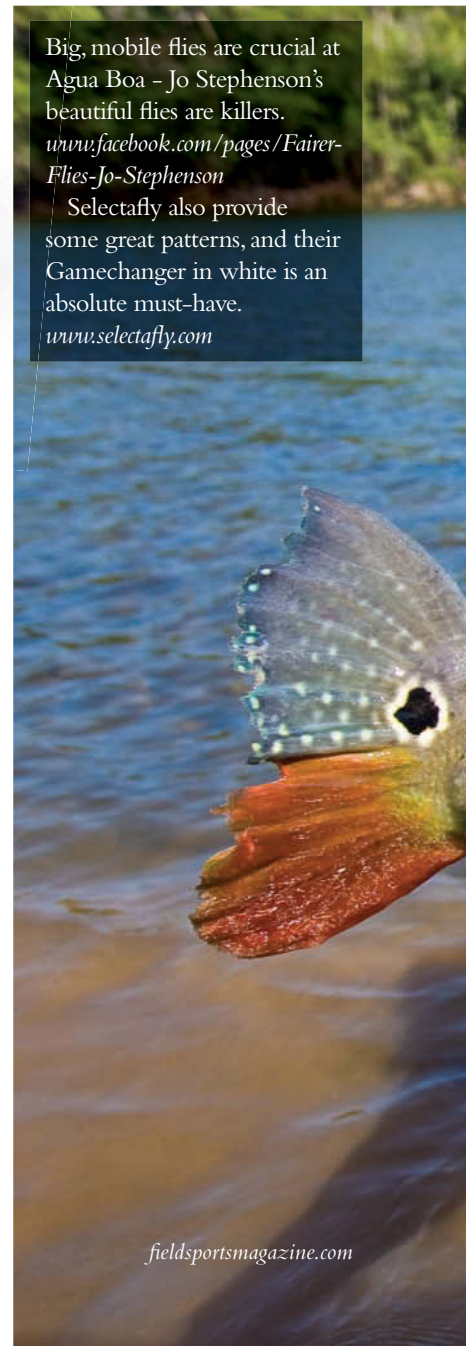
As we peer into the deep shadows under the dense canopy of trees that line the banks, the hunt becomes all-engrossing. The relentless blur of colours and noises that the jungle throws out slowly recedes as Caboco and I fix all our attention on the dappled recesses and fallen trees that – similar to most ambush-based predators – peacocks tend to favour.

I throw a few blind casts into ➡



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Selectafly also provide some great patterns, and their Gamechanger in white is an absolute must-have. www.selectafly.com





Lance Ranger & his guide head upstream on the Agua Boa



The huge jaws of a large peacock



Guide Caboco proudly shows off a 20lb peacock bass

“Finally, three long hours after leaving the dock, we arrive at the spot that Carlos has suggested might just produce a monster.”

FISHING ADVENTURES



Lance Ranger fishing at dawn on the Agua Boa

the slots and hidey-holes, but nothing stirs. The treescape at the far end of the lagoon shimmers in the laser-bright sunlight, and sweat trickles from my forehead as the temperature climbs into the low 40s°C.

I spot a bow-wave up ahead, and a quick, low cast produces a handsome paca that fights like a demon. As I draw it to the boat, I admire its surreal, fauvist colours, but whilst anywhere else a 12-pounder would be cause for celebration, here it is just getting in our way and Caboco returns it without ceremony.

Caboco then poles us quietly through a dense shoal of small red-tailed catfish, listlessly sunning themselves in the still waters, and I toss the fly lazily at them, but they are utterly unimpressed. Up ahead, a huge arapaima rolls its three-metre fuselage through the glossy surface, but a series of deep-dredging casts produce nothing, just as my guide predicts, and I curse the feverish horde of piranhas that follow the huge Deceiver fly up out of the depths and give it a savage haircut with their razor fangs.

Our circuit of the lagoon is almost over, and I start to question the wisdom of our early start and the long, long trek up the river, when lagoons much closer to home are heaving with hefty peacocks. I start to formulate a few wisecracks with which to admonish Carlos once we have endured the long ride back to the lodge, when suddenly, from out of nowhere, there he is... A truly huge peacock, gliding nonchalantly through the inky shadows of the forest, hugging the shoreline and protected by the tangled cage of branches provided by a fallen tree.

Caboco is ahead of me – he spots the single gap in the

sprawling mass of branches and poles deftly into position to give me a shot. There's no time for complicated calculations – the peacock is closing on the gap and if I don't make the shot now, I will have missed my chance. I work the huge streamer into the air and keep the rod low as I sweep the cast in, low and fast. The line fizzes through the gap, but just as I'm congratulating myself, the fly catches on the very end of a slender branch. The whole day – the whole trip – may come down to this crucial moment. I hold my breath and draw the line back gently. For a moment, time stands still, and then, mercifully, the fly drops off of the end of the branch and down onto the dark water. I see the big, white streamer hovering in the shadows, and watch as the great fish comes ambling slowly

towards it. I give the fly a long, slow strip to announce its presence, and suddenly the huge peacock bristles angrily and shoots forward, demolishing the fly in an instant and erupting from the glassy water as it feels the hook.

I pull back hard and try to hold the fish. Peacocks are unstoppably powerful, but somehow I get lucky and the fish goes rushing out into the lagoon, rather than heading into the sunken tree that would surely provide its liberation. The water boils as the fish bulldozes around the lagoon in a demented rage and the rod creaks right down to the cork as I try to make an impression on the fish. For long moments, we go at it hard. Finally, the peacock realises its mistake and heads for the sunken tree, but he's burned most of his precious energy fighting in the open water, and the crisp 10wt rod and 44lb



A black caiman

leader refuse to yield as I hold the fish hard.

Everything holds together and, finally, the huge fish is reduced to skulking in open water.

A protracted tug-of-war and eventually it is wallowing drunkenly by the boat. Caboco creeps quietly down from his platform and, as I draw the mighty fish to the gunwales, my guide leans out, attaches the Boga Grip and heaves the fish aboard.

It looks vast. I think of my son, Tom, back home on the far-side

of the world. "Put this in your fishtank!" I'll grin, as I dig him in the ribs and show him the picture a few days from now.

We hold our breath as Caboco reads the scales and then he is high-fiving me and cheering wildly. Despite his innate natural aptitude for guiding, Caboco is still young – this is the biggest peacock he's ever seen, and he is truly elated.

He turns the scales for me to read, 20lb 8oz – the fish of a lifetime.




Matt Harris shows off a big peacock that took a huge 'poledancer' surface popper

CONTACT

Agua Boa Amazon Lodge is an Orvis-endorsed lodge and is owned by Lance Ranger, who is committed to preserving the lodge's pristine fly-only fishery and all aspects of its local environment. The lodge is run by two hugely likeable characters, Carlos Azavedo and Charlie Conn. Despite being right in the heart of the jungle, the lodge offers luxurious, air-conditioned accommodation, wi-fi, a large swimming pool, great, exotic food and delicious, high octane caipirinhas. The guides are all hard-working and highly professional. Despite limited English, they are also very friendly and great company.

For further information, contact Tarquin Millington Drake of Frontiers Travel UK. Tel. +44 (0)845 299 6212 E. info@frontierstrvl.co.uk



ATLANTIC SALMON

THE HOLY GRAIL

Marcus Janssen considers what it is that makes a spring salmon the ultimate prize in fly fishing.

It is difficult to put your finger on what it is that makes spring fishing in Scotland so magical, so incomparably addictive. Perhaps it is the knowledge that the rivers of Norway, Iceland, Russia and Canada, the ones that will hog the limelight later in the year, are still in the firm grip of a ferocious winter. But while these glamorous northern fisheries are, in all likelihood,

buried beneath thick sheets of ice and a blanket of snow, their first sunrise months away, on many of Scotland's rivers there is already the chance of landing one of nature's true miracles: an early season spring salmon.

Perhaps that is where the magic lies – in the fact that Scotland offers you the very first crack of the whip, the earliest possible chance to get onto a river with salmon in your sights. It's the breaking of a new dawn, the promise of a new season filled with uncertainty and hope – the long dark nights of winter are finally over.

But perhaps it's more than that, perhaps it is the incomparable quarry? For surely there isn't another creature in the piscine world more beautiful than a fresh-run, early season salmon? Bright, chrome-plated with an iridescent purple sheen, thick shoulders, streamlined, deep-bodied, fin perfect and packed with cold,



hard muscle. Anyone who has ever cradled such a fish amongst the grue in February or March will know that such a moment stays with you forever.

Or, maybe it is the challenge. There is no such thing as an easy springer. Each and every one requires dedication, perseverance and hard work. In fact, spring fishing in Scotland might aptly be described as the piscatorial equivalent to self flagellation. Choosing to stand up to your nipples in water that is only in its liquid form because of the speed at which it tumbles out of the Cairngorms, whilst your face, neck and hands are lashed by sleet and an icy wind fresh out of Siberia, may seem, to ordinary people, an odd way of enjoying yourself.

The combination of swollen rivers, hefty double-handed rods, heavy sinking lines, big, weighted tube flies and extra layers of clothing makes casting more of an effort than it ought to be. And it's slow and tedious work, requiring intense concentration as you methodically scour the depths, pools, pockets, known holding lies, carefully controlling the speed and depth of your fly with big upstream mends. Although springers tend to be keen takers, the cold means their metabolisms are slow and they won't move a long way for your fly. So you've got to fish slower and deeper than you would later in the year.

Ice forms around the line and the guides must be lubricated with Vaseline to prevent them from freezing up completely. By mid-morning, controlling your appendages – never mind your fly line – has become a real challenge. You have lost all sensation in your hands, your legs tingle from a lack of circulation, your feet ache and throb mercilessly and, inadvertently, tears and snot run down your cheeks and drip off the end of your nose.

Mrs J. tells me that she genuinely had second thoughts about our future together when she realised that I was *actually* about to wade out into the icy ripples of the Spey while there was still a smattering of snow on the ground. "You're not right," she said. "You need to have

your head checked." With that she wound the car windows up and headed into Aberlour for a coffee. But it really *is* worth it, I promise you.

Believe me, when, after your 1,000th cast in God knows how many days, your line suddenly tightens up and your frozen reel splutters to life as you feel the unmistakable head-shake of a salmon, you will instantly know that the hours of discomfort you have endured have been worth it. And some. As that hit of the purest drug in all of fishing surges through your veins, the cold, the aches, the pain and the second thoughts all become distant memories as you mentally scream at the top of your lungs "Yes, yes, YES!"

But as the fish surges across the stream, and more fly line and then backing is ripped from your protesting reel, it suddenly occurs to you that this could be the one, the fish you've dreamt of a thousand times, the one you've begged the piscatorial gods for ever since you caught your first salmon all those years ago. Jubilation soon makes way for nervous tension, the adrenaline come-down leaving you jittery and paranoid that it may be lightly hooked or your knot too hastily tied. Am I playing it too gingerly? Am I putting on too much pressure? Your mind races. Of course, there's no way of knowing whether this will end in triumph or heartbreak, but that is precisely why we do this. I wish I had gone for the 23lb Seaguar rather than the 19lb, you think to yourself as the bow-taut flyline sings in the icy February wind.

As the fish heads upstream against the swift current, you can do little more than hold the rod high above any potential snags and hope for the best. But eventually, to your relief, you start to gain some line as the fish, still deep and unseen, turns to head downstream. For the first time, you feel the odds shift in your favour and, with a new flutter of excitement, the first few turns of fly line are wound back onto the reel.

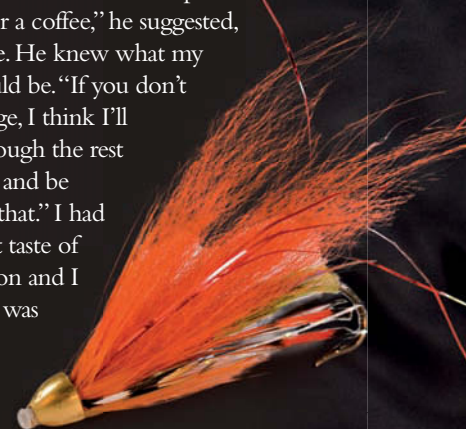
But of course the defining moment comes right at the end, in those nerve-wracking seconds when, upon realising that the battle

is all but won, you pile on as much pressure as you dare while a trusted friend or ghillie nervously gets into position with the net. "Dinnae rush it laddie," says the ghillie. So many fish are lost at this stage, the finest sinew between hook and fish finally giving way as you steer the fish towards the net with a little too much gusto. The disappointment of losing a good fish at this stage, particularly a spring fish, can be almost heartbreaking. And it always seems to happen in slow motion: slowly, slowly, almost theatrically, the fish rolls into the current and slips out of sight. If your nerves were not so shot, you might have the presence of mind to jump in and grab it so that you might have a few minutes to admire it before letting it continue its incredible journey. But instead, you are left standing there, helpless, forlorn, pathetic and utterly devastated. "Sorry lad," says the ghillie in an attempt to console you. "It wud be boring if we landed them aw."

Luckily, my first ever spring salmon, hooked one snowy March morning on the Upper Arndilly beat on the Spey, didn't get away. Thanks in part to legendary ghillie George Michie's calm demeanour and skill with a net, I did in fact end up cradling that fish in a back eddy in the Heathery Isle pool, before reluctantly letting it go.

For a while, we just stood there, George inspecting my fly and nodding his approval at my choice of pattern, an orange and gold Temple dog tied on a brass bottle tube, me grinning like an idiot. I knew that I had reached a landmark in my fishing career, a feat that I would never repeat – I had landed my first ever springer, the ultimate prize in the salmon fishing world. And by god was it beautiful – more beautiful than any fish I had ever seen before. "Aye, a braw fush," agreed George who appeared to be as pleased as I was, although that can't have been possible.

"Time for a coffee," he suggested, after a while. He knew what my answer would be. "If you don't mind George, I think I'll just fish through the rest of this pool and be down after that." I had had my first taste of spring salmon and I knew there was no turning back.



Taxing times for shooting

Are you risking the VAT inspector being an uninvited guest at your shoot?
David McGeachy, director and VAT specialist at Saffery Champness – Landed Estates and Rural Business Group – explains.

There is a question that underlies most fieldsports, and particularly shooting issues, that I'm asked to advise on – is this a hobby, a business or a mix of both? If there is a business motive, then you could actually be inadvertently inviting the VAT inspector to attend your shoot.

The failure by shoot operators to address this question is at the heart of most problems involving VAT and shooting activities. If you are shooting with family and friends as a hobby, you are not running a business and the only VAT you should pay is on

some of your costs and if you pay someone for the right to shoot on the land. If you are in business, and generating shooting income above the current VAT threshold of £81,000 per annum, or as part of another VAT registered business, you need to account for VAT on your shooting income. Once VAT registered, you will be allowed to recover VAT on your associated shoot costs, albeit these might be limited as mentioned above.

Why is shooting so difficult to deal with when it comes to VAT?

Typically, the shoot operator enjoys shooting and also wants to invite family and friends to shoot. However, shoots are relatively expensive to run, even if family and friends are sharing some of the costs. Asking friends and family for increasing contributions can rather sour enjoyment of a pleasurable day out. As there are inevitably days that could be let to attract income from third parties, it would seem

sensible to do so to cover some of the costs.

There is a presumption that selling let days is a business activity for

VAT purposes, and the VAT system copes poorly with activities that are partly business and partly hobby (non-business) in nature. The measure to keep in mind is the £81,000 limit on income per annum. HMRC believe that if there are any let days to third parties this suggests the shoot is all business, and all charges made to both family and friends and from let days count towards that limit. If the threshold is breached, the shoot must be VAT registered and account for VAT on the shoot charges made to both family and friends and regularly to third parties. This may appear grossly unfair, but it is HMRC policy and it has found some support in the courts.

There is certainly a dilemma here. If the shoot wishes to generate additional income from third parties, it risks having to account for VAT on all income, including contributions from family and friends. Further on I will look at the alternatives for running shoots that permit expansion to generate extra income without the requirement to account for VAT.

What is meant by shooting as a 'hobby'?

Most people involved in shooting will have come across the terms 'syndicate' and 'private shoot'. These terms, when used in a VAT context, are normally meant to apply to non-business shoots. If the VAT conditions are met, these types of shoots are treated as non-business by HMRC and no VAT is accounted for on contributions from friends and family, even if these exceed £81,000 per annum. I have used the term 'hobby' to refer to all shoots that operate on this non-business basis for VAT purposes.

The non-business syndicate for VAT purposes must meet some strict conditions to preserve its non-business status. The most important one is that it must not advertise and let days to third parties. A private shoot is a very similar beast, except the owner of the sporting rights organises and runs the shoot. If the owner decides to accept contributions towards the costs from friends and family who are shooting, these must be calculated so his loss (which must be borne personally) is equal to a 'Gun'. In both private shoots and non-business syndicates, advertising and marketing the shoot to third

parties is not permitted if VAT non-business status is to be preserved.

As you will have noted, running a non-business shoot is largely incompatible with even modest 'business' activity for VAT purposes. However, there is an alternative that may suit some shoots that do not wish to VAT register and charge VAT to friends, family or third parties as a business shoot.

“If the threshold is breached, the shoot must be VAT registered... This may appear grossly unfair, but it is HMRC policy and it has found some support in the courts.”

Join the club?

Members' sports clubs can enjoy the best of both worlds. They are normally more informal than a business, but they do attract income from a more commercial way of operating, not open to non-business shoots that wish to preserve a non-business VAT status. From a VAT perspective, they are treated as a business. However, a sports club can qualify for VAT exemption on its shooting income. If they do wish to expand to generate additional income from third parties, this is also VAT exempt, provided the individuals become members for at least three months. If they separately charge for catering and accommodation alongside the shooting, this is also perfectly permissible, albeit if these activities exceed £81,000 a year, the club would need to register and account for VAT. Importantly, the income from the sporting activity of shooting would still be VAT exempt even if the club was VAT registered. Membership of the club can be closely controlled if the club wishes and there is flexibility to allow third parties to join and leave as the club wishes, subject to the minimum three-month membership period.

Is there a catch? There are three points to take note of, and there may be a catch depending on your reasons for shooting in the first place. Firstly, members' sports clubs, to qualify for the VAT exemption on shooting income, must be not-for-profit and they are unable to recover VAT on the costs associated

with the shoot. This means they must not distribute any surplus funds they make, but invest them back into the shoot.

Secondly, VAT exemption is available to individual members who shoot. It is not designed to be used to let corporate days. However, there is nothing to stop individuals who happen to work together from joining a club as members in order to shoot.

Thirdly, members' sports clubs must be free from 'commercial influence'. This is a complex set of rules in VAT law designed to prevent the owner of the sporting rights from controlling the sports club directly or indirectly where the owner is charging the club for the sporting rights. The purpose of the rules is to prevent the owner having the power to compel the club to agree to increasing charges for the sporting rights, to extract any surpluses generated from the club members.

Complying with these rules means the owner will effectively lose control over the running of the shoot; nor can he or she be an officer of the club or be involved in its management. The rules also trap any surpluses (if any surpluses were to be generated) inside the sports club. Unfortunately, the rules are a blunt instrument and take no account of the motives of the parties involved.

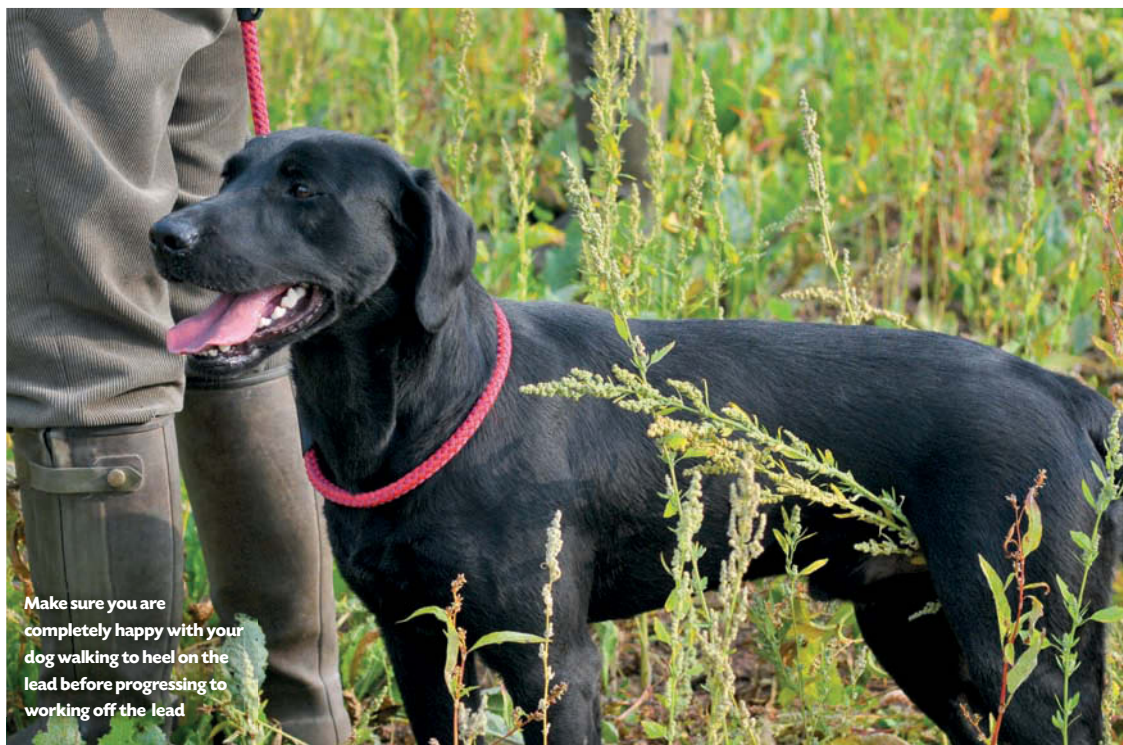
The members' sports club has the attractiveness of the VAT exemption on shooting charges. However, it has clear drawbacks that may make it unsuitable for some shoot operators.

The members' sports club structure may also best suit a shoot that does not currently make a profit, but aims to, and is prepared to add new members to cover its costs without becoming fully commercial. It would tend to be less suitable for fully commercial profit-making shoots or where the owner of the sporting rights wishes to keep control and enjoy 'free' or heavily subsidised shooting.

It will be clear that the VAT system was not designed with the financial and practical difficulties of running a modern shoot in mind, particularly where landowners are forced to confront spiralling running costs. However, the decision to sell the 'odd' let day in the season should not be taken lightly as it could result in an unintended invitation to the friendly VAT inspector in the years ahead.

CANINE QUANDARIES

Our panel of gundog experts answer your questions.



Make sure you are completely happy with your dog walking to heel on the lead before progressing to working off the lead

Q: My dog walks to heel perfectly off the lead, but as soon as I put the slip lead on her, she insists on pulling. How do I remedy this?

JAYNE: You are going to have to go back to basics. I would have her on a light lead and when she pulls, firmly pull her back to the correct position saying 'heel' and immediately reward her with a slack lead and quiet praise. Keep the sessions on the lead fairly short to begin with. If she has been allowed to pull on the lead for a long time, it is probably going to take a lot of patience and perseverance on your part.

BEN: This can quite often be the case, and often a symptom of shortcuts made during training on the lead. Many dogs will walk better off the lead because they do not feel restricted,

but as soon as the lead goes on, they will challenge their lack of freedom by pulling. This indicates a lack of respect for their handler, who, nine times out of ten, will give in and let the dog off the lead again, because it walks better to heel. Hence the dog has won. You need to go back to working just on the lead and only continue to train the dog to walk to heel off the lead when you are 100 per cent satisfied with this. The transition should be a gradual process, utilising confined areas such as corridors and fence lines. I always start training a dog to walk off the lead by having the lead dangling in my left hand, so that it is almost touching the dog's nose while it walks to heel. This way, it still thinks that it is on the lead.



JAYNE COLEY

Jayne Coley is a Labrador and retriever expert and top level field trialer. She has been both a competitor and a judge at the very pinnacle of the sport, the IGL Retriever Championship. She has made up nine and bred 11 Field Trial Champions, including the 2014 runner-up in The IGL Retriever Championship – Sean McGrath's four-year-old dog FTCh Waterford Hallmark.



BEN RANDALL

Ben Randall runs Beggarrbush Gundog Kennels and Ledbury Lodge Kennels where he breeds and trains dogs for the shooting field. He is a two-time winner of the Cocker Spaniel Championship and was the 2013 Gundog Trainer of the Year. He was recently a judge at the 2014/15 English Springer Spaniel Championship, held at Thirlestane Estate, Lauder.

Q: I'd like to get into trialling with my gundogs. Where do I start?

BEN: A professional gundog trainer can help advise on whether you and your dog will be capable of entering a field trial. I'd also thoroughly recommend joining your local gundog club. This is a great place to talk to other handlers, often with a range of experience levels, and find new training partners. To get the most out of a day with the local gundog club, and get a better idea of what it is all about, offer to help carry game, steward and shoot.

JAYNE: First of all, your dogs must be registered with the Kennel Club. You cannot enter a field trial with an unregistered dog. Purchase a current copy of the Kennel Club's *Field Trial Regulations* (see their website). This booklet explains what is required from you and your dog, and the general procedure. I'd recommend going to watch a trial, and offer to carry game so you can be in a good position to watch the dogs and handlers. Again, look online at the Kennel Club Field Trial Diary to find out when trials are being held in your area.

Getting involved with your local gundog club can be very rewarding



The off-season is an important time to address your dog's weaker areas

Q: Now that the shooting season has drawn to a close, where do you recommend I start with my dog's off-season training? Would you typically follow a set routine, or focus only on the areas that appeared to need attention during the season?

JAYNE: After the shooting season, I always give my dogs February off. By doing this, they are hungry to start training with dummies again by March. I like to start off training on my own, going over the basics – lefts, rights, backs and stop whistle.

Yes, you need to work on your dog's weaknesses, but don't bore him by going over the same old thing. Keep the sessions

fairly short and interesting, and try to make an effort to go out with like-minded people, training on different grounds.

BEN: Once the season has finished, like Jayne I have a break and give the dogs February to rest and recoup. Come March, we are straight back into training, working on weaker areas identified during the season. However, it is important to remember that during the season, if you do notice a problem, you must address it immediately rather than allow it to continue developing until the season's end.

Off-season training should be varied, fine-tuning the basics that you have ingrained in your dog through a sound training regime.

Q: I plan to breed from my labrador bitch. What should I be looking for in a stud dog?

JAYNE: For me, temperament is most important. I like a nice pedigree – look at the Kennel Club Mate Select website to calculate the degree of inbreeding, or inbreeding coefficient for puppies that could be produced from a hypothetical mating. A good looking dog (if your bitch is very finely built or small, you may prefer to use a dog with good bone and size), low hip score, zero elbows and a current clear eye certificate, are all things to consider. You may wish to take DNA test results into account. Colour might be important to you – if you use a dominant black dog on a yellow bitch, all the

puppies will be black, but they will all carry the yellow gene. Have a word with the person who bred your bitch, they may recommend dogs whose pedigrees would tie in nicely with your bitch. If you consider using a local dog, arrange to go and see him to make sure you like him.

BEN: I would be looking for a dog with sound results from health tests and a pedigree that will match well to that of my bitch. In a stud dog, I always seek out attributes that will enhance the line. For example, if my bitch is a little weaker on the retrieve I would look for a big strong dog that retrieves well. Likewise, if my bitch was less inclined to hunt, a dog with a reputation for hunting an area thoroughly would be preferable.

GUNDOGS

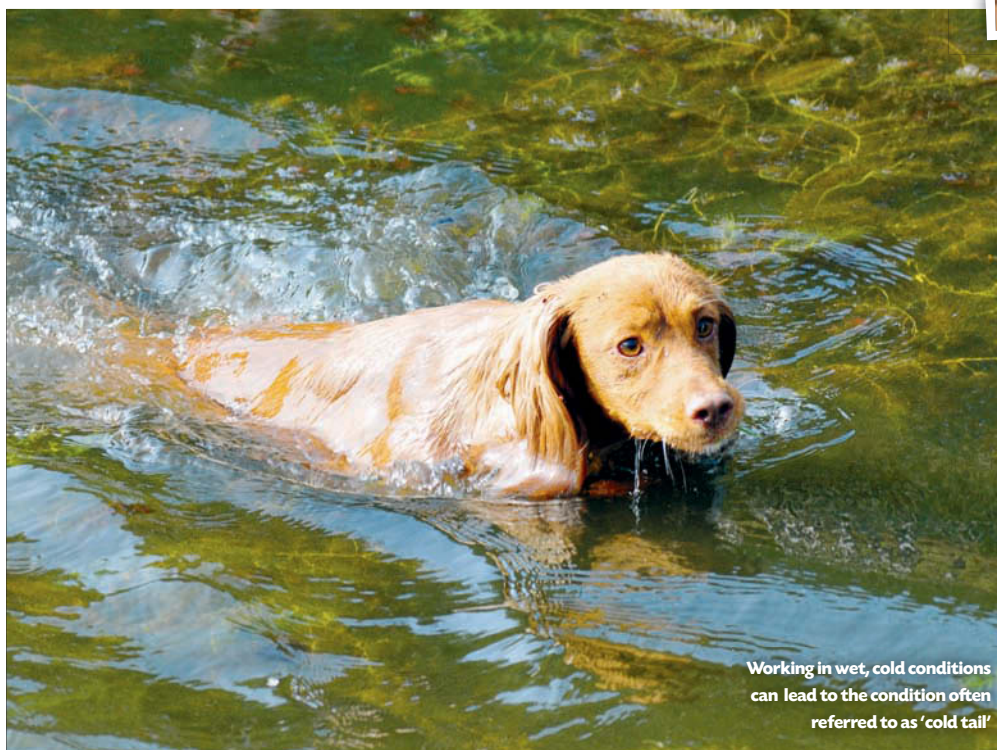
Q: If my dog has been working in the wet, she will often appear to have a broken tail the next day, that hangs limp and crooked. What causes this? Is it something to worry about?

JAYNE: This condition has many names – wet tail, cold tail, monkey tail among them. It is painful for the dog and some dogs seem to be prone to getting it. It usually occurs when a dog has been in water. To help avoid this, it is important to dry off your dog after working in wet conditions, especially around the base of the tail. Should your dog get it, keep him quiet and don't let other dogs bother him. It usually lasts about 48 hours, but if it is really bad and does not improve after three or four days, I suggest you take him to your vet

who will probably prescribe painkillers and anti-inflammatories.

BEN: I've only had this happen once with one of my dogs, caused by working in wet, cold conditions. I would recommend the use of a heat lamp, anti-inflammatories and rest until the dog has recovered. If you are uncertain, a trip to the vets is not unwise.

In my opinion, the diet of a dog and its overall fitness can determine its susceptibility to the condition, to some extent. Supplementing my dogs' food with salmon oil, which maintains a well-conditioned coat, combined with a good level of fitness maintained through the off-season, play a key part in minimising their vulnerability to the condition.



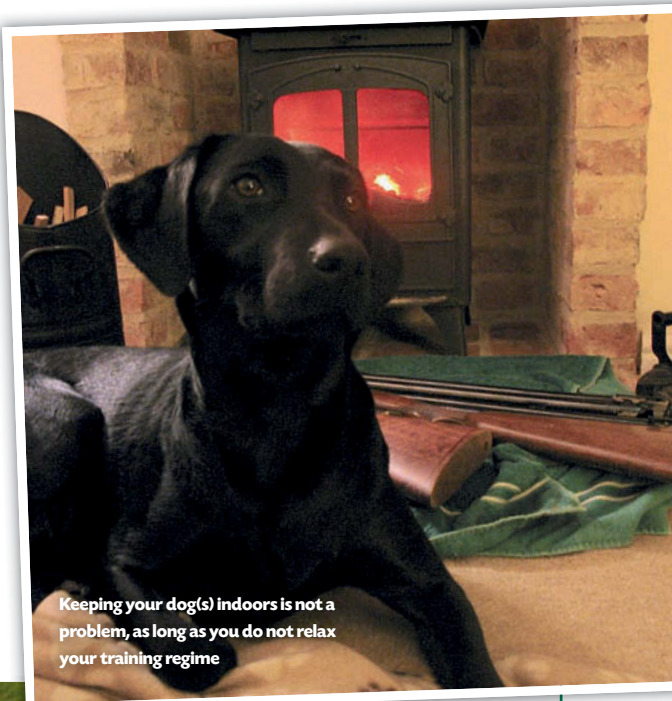
Working in wet, cold conditions can lead to the condition often referred to as 'cold tail'

Q: My spaniel is very excitable and will often jump up at people. How do I stop this, and is there anything I should have done when she was younger to prevent it?

BEN: This all comes down to being a pack leader. If a dog jumps up at people, it is very likely that it also jumps up at you, because you haven't asserted yourself as pack leader. If a dog respects you, it will not

challenge your space (jump up). Similarly, it should not feel the need to challenge the space of others around you.

To address this problem, intervene and push your dog away from the person it has jumped up at, entering the dog's space until it backs away. Practice this consistently until the dog realises that it is doing wrong and does not need to challenge the space of others.



Keeping your dog(s) indoors is not a problem, as long as you do not relax your training regime

Q: My friend has told me that keeping a dog indoors, rather than in a kennel, can affect its training in the long run. Is there any truth in this? And are there any rules I should abide by if keeping my dog inside?

JAYNE: A working dog can live indoors, but there must be some basic rules in place. Don't let your children throw balls or have tug-of-war games or generally make the dog over-excited. Teach your dog house manners, as appropriate, e.g. not climbing on furniture or going into certain rooms. And make sure he does as he is told, as you would expect when you have him outdoors.

BEN: I think that with some dogs in particular it can actually benefit them to live indoors. They often appear to be more rounded, relaxed and level-headed than a dog that lives in the kennel. However, it is very easy to slip away from a strict training regime when a dog lives inside, and you must ensure that the dog only does things with your permission. If you ask the dog to sit and stay while you go and make a cup of tea, make sure it sits and stays, just as you'd expect during a training session. Likewise, there is no problem with a dog jumping up on the sofa with you as long as it has not done so without being invited by you. You are the pack leader and so you decide what the dog does and when.

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THE CROWNING OF A NEW CHAMPION

Ben Randall reports on the 2014 IGL Retriever Championship,
held at Windsor Great Park.

PHOTOGRAPHY: BOB ATKINS

The excitement, the nerves, the anticipation – I could sense them all. Months of training and thousands of miles of travel across the country to qualify was over. Now was the time to put it all on show at the country's premier event. But this year was extra special. The IGL Retriever Championship was being hosted at the famous Windsor Great Park, by gracious permission of Her Majesty The Queen and the Crown Commissioners.

The judges were Keith Bedford, John Stubbs, Ian Openshaw and Jamie Bettinson – four experienced dog and shooting men. In fact,

John Stubbs is actually a former Windsor Great Park headkeeper. Current headkeeper Peter Clayton was steward of the beat.

We started in parkland with rough grasses, bracken and small wooded areas. Instantly noticeable was the high quality of cover. I was walking with John Halstead Sr, one of the most respected dog men the world over, whose wife and son were competing – this was a proud moment for him.

David Latham was one of the first to be put to the test with Beileys Aguzannis of Fendawood. He was sent for a cock bird shot in front of the line. One cast out and it was picked,

nice and clean. Soon after, a hen was shot at the far left of the line, landing just short of a fallen tree. FTCh Asterix Aguzannis of Chatsworth, handled by John Halstead Jr. was sent from the top of the far right bank. It must have been hard to see the fall but John held his dog in the area well and picked it.

It soon became apparent that the scent was poor as dogs were having to be held in areas to help them locate the birds. Craig Perry, a good friend of mine who was running FTCh Cynhinf John, failed on a runner, top-side of the line under the woodland edge. Shortly after, a hen bird was shot out in front, which



Swapping notes – the judges, Ian Openshaw, Jamie Bettinson, John Stubbs & Keith Bedford

Jayne Coley picked with FTCh Waterford Featherman with one cast and a clean retrieve.

Shortly after, the judges held the line as one of the Guns saw a previously shot woodcock running from hawthorn across grass into bracken. Andy Latham, brother to David, was sent to an area in the high bracken and, despite there being a lot of live birds in the area, FTCh Rimrock Hurricane held well and picked the running woodcock.

Tadhg Kelly's Carrickview Holly was sent for a blind partridge shot behind. He handled the distractions of the other birds being driven over him well and, after a couple of handles, picked the bird. The same dog was then sent for a lightly-hit hen pheasant, 80 – 100 yards behind the line and nearly out of sight. Holly made the fall well, but this was a strong runner. A few tense moments followed as she disappeared into the high bracken, but she soon emerged with the bird in her mouth, bringing it quickly to hand.

Another cock pheasant had been shot on the left, over a ditch and up on a bank, which saw our first golden retriever, FTCh Holway Cider, sent. One perfect line, one cast, and picked straightaway. A great nerve settler!

FTCh Jobeshill Lotta of Stauntonvale was brought in for a hen shot on the far right up a bank, some 150 yards away. Laura Hill's bitch lined well, made the area and after a few casts located the bird, completing with a clean, controlled retrieve. Another hen had been shot in a similar direction some 30 yards on, close to the gallery. FTCh Levenghyl Jacana of Abbottshall was sent but could not make the area. The second dog called in was Artistryn Quail, handled by Roger Colver in his first

championship. Roger got his bitch up to the area, but she pulled up onto the woodland edge and so was called in, too. This saw Laura Hill called in for a two dog eyewipe opportunity. One straight cast and her bitch made the distance and located the bird.

FTCh Saxaphone Brown Ale of Lincswolds – a strong yellow lab dog owned and handled by Richard King – had a long bird shot behind the line soon after. Richard made this look very easy

with a nice clean retrieve.

There were whispers in the crowd that Her Majesty was arriving and, sure enough, as we made our way to a field of mustard a Range Rover appeared through the park and Her Majesty joined the line, walking for some 2 – 3 hours – a true ambassador of our sport and incredibly knowledgeable about the dogs and handlers. This really made for an exciting second half of the day. It was a true honour for all those involved to be running in line with Her Majesty watching.

Derek Hill's FTCh Stauntonvale Fastnet had a cock bird shot 20 yards in front, landing in 4ft-high mustard. It looked like a potential runner. Fastnet was sent, hit the fall and went. Ian Openshaw ran forward and raised his stick – she had it.

One partridge shot on the far left of the line near a small woodland provided a key moment in the opening day of the Championship. FTCh Brindlebay Gertie of Birdsgreen, handled by

Sarah Gadd, was sent and called up after some time. Second to be sent was Phil Highfield's FTCh Waterford Harris of Featherfly, again called up. The 2013 defending winner, FTCh Ellijas Danny handled by Leigh Jackson, tried next. Unfortunately, he was also called up and Fastnet was brought across to try, succeeded on the bird and eyewiped the three dogs before her, putting them out of the running. It was hard to see Leigh go out in such a way – only a few years ago I was in his shoes trying to win the Cocker Championships for a second year in a row. I can imagine what it meant to him.

After the halfway point, Sandra Halstead, running Greenbriar Thunder at Drakeshead, had two retrieves picked cleanly, with a cock bird running a short distance. Jayne Coley's FTCh Waterford Ganton had a good eyewipe, with quiet controlled handling. A good afternoon for both ladies – testament to their vast experience.

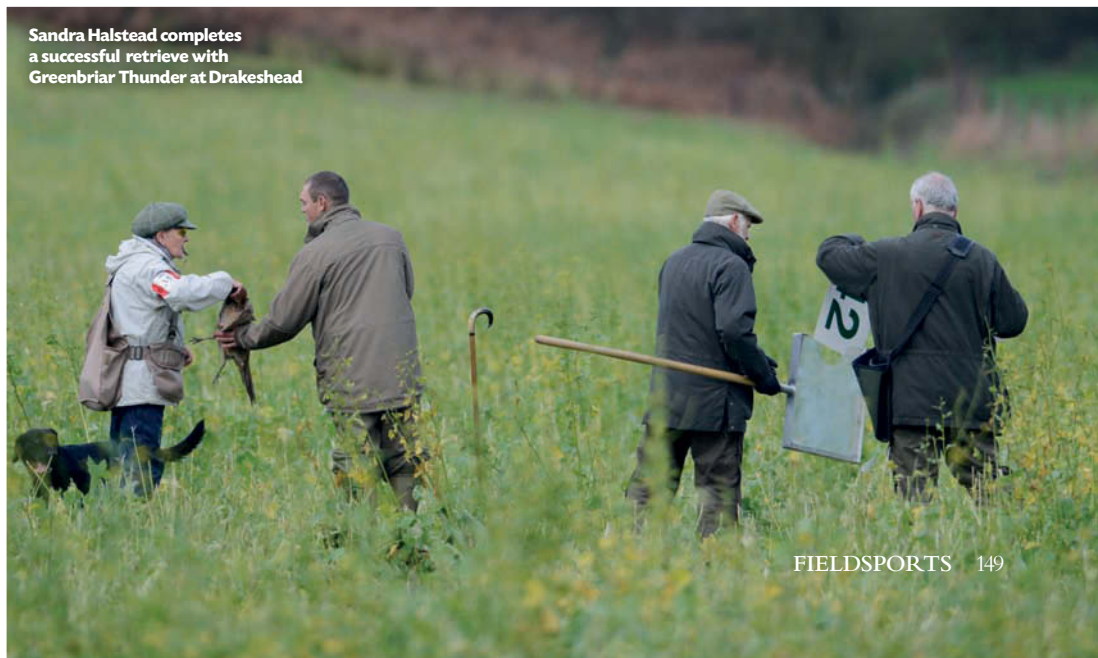
A very exciting first day concluded at 2pm. Windsor had proved to be a great ground so far. Judge Jamie Bettinson further praised the natural cover in the parkland, but noted poor scent at times and cold temperatures. Dogs needed to show their natural ability, as did handlers, their marking ability and control to get their dogs to the right areas being key.

Headkeeper Peter Clayton had orchestrated the walk-ups and mini drives to perfection.

DAY TWO

For the second day we were mostly in beet fields. Partridges were the main quarry, and it was cold, starting with mist and rain. Early on, Andy Latham was sent for a long partridge that had landed out of sight across the line. Andy ➡

Sandra Halstead completes a successful retrieve with Greenbriar Thunder at Drakeshead



GUNDOGS

made one really good straight line and picked it well with Rimrock Hurricane.

A small drive of mixed gamebirds landing behind the line followed, proving a challenge for some handlers and dogs as they tried to mark birds down and handle their dogs off others they had marked. FTCh Waterford Ganton was sent for a partridge shot behind the line. Both Jayne and the judge had marked the bird but from their view it appeared to be nearer than it was, and Ganton was called up. FTCh Jobeshill Ragnar of Flypatch, a powerful yellow dog handled by Alan Rees, tried next, hit a line along the track and winded the bird.

Peter then moved us all into a wet field of low, dense rape – a test for both the handlers' marking and the dogs' noses. An early partridge was shot some way out, but only hit lightly. Mike Tallamy with FTCh Garrethall Quill of Brindlebay was sent as the bird hit the ground. He made the fall, hunted well but unfortunately failed and was called up. A couple of other dogs tried but found nothing. The judges went

FTCh Jobeshill Ragnar of Flypatch & handler Alan Rees

forward to check but the bird was long gone. This put Mike out as the first dog down.

As we continued into some beet, birds were lifting out a good distance in front of the Guns, making for testing shooting. A partridge was flushed and clipped some 50 yards away. David Latham's Beileys Aguzannis of Fendawood was sent. I had already guessed the outcome and sure enough, after counting 3 – 4 seconds for the dog to hit the fall, it immediately indicated and started hunting the area. David allowed him to use his nose and gave him every chance to pick it, but to no avail, and so was called up by the judges. This saw Barry Taylor's dog try – also failing. Again, the judges checked but nothing was found. David was out – the first dog down – a brutal way to be knocked out. One more pellet in the right spot, and his dog would have picked in one cast. That's trialling for you.

The second day continued with two more partridges shot in front, only 30 or so yards out, and both looked dead. The first was picked cleanly. The second was tried by Carrickview Holly, a bitch that impressed me with some great work on the first day, but Holly would not hold in the area and so was called up. Laura Hill's bitch was asked to try but again would not hold the area of the fall tight enough to locate the bird. Richard King then sent his dog, over-shot the fall by a small distance, used a slight recall, 'stop' and 'hunt' command, and the dog's head hit the area and picked without any fuss – two more dogs left the competition. A second partridge for Richard followed, one clean cast and nicely retrieved – he was starting



Headkeeper Peter Clayton

to put together some quality dog work, which was surely lifting him in the judges' books.

Not long after, Sandra Halstead had a pricked bird shot out in front and picked cleanly, followed by another which her dog just over-shot on the wrong side of the wind. But a

slight re-adjustment, a couple of handles and it picked well.

Next we moved into a rough grass field, where a few birds were shot. Kirsty Cousins picked clean, adding to her good performance so far, whilst Tim Brain built on a solid performance with Flypatch Alfa.

A rabbit was shot on the far right of the line, some 150 yards away from the handlers across the grass, through the crop and into a rough area. Alan Rees was sent from the opposite end of the line and his dog lined superbly and picked the rabbit in one straight cast.

Right until the end, one of the most impressive dogs, for me, was FTCh Waterford Hallmark, which was well handled over the three days by Shaun McGrath. Shaun had a partridge shot on the left of the line, which his dog picked cleanly with just one adjustment. A few more dogs ran in the wooded area before the second day drew to a close.

DAY THREE

The final day was crisp and sunny, with a cold nip in the air – and it began with a little drama.

No. 48 Tuscany Viking was called out of the car... but didn't appear. Much to the owner's dismay, he had accidentally brought the wrong dog! Nevertheless, after a few frantic telephone calls Viking was delivered to the ground and





The award winners

was ready to compete.

We started in a mustard field, where I caught up with judge Jamie Bettinson again. He was excited about the final day and commented on the first class quality of the 15 remaining dog and handler partnerships.

Before long, Richard King was in again, sent on a cock bird that was a strong runner. His dog hit the fall, lined and picked well, a long way out, following this up with a further cock pheasant retrieved in one command – further positives to Richard’s already impressive two days.

Kirsty Cousins continued her run with two long, testing retrieves and completed both very well, whilst Shaun McGrath had a cock bird shot to the left of the line, which was back in his hand after just one command. The quality of dog work was rising with every retrieve.

Next there was a mini drive of partridges, ducks, pigeons and pheasants – those shot landing in the mustard. Amongst them, Shaun had another nice blind retrieve on a cock bird behind the line against the woodland edge, whilst the drive was still in full flow.

Just after midday, the line stopped as once again we were treated to Her Majesty’s presence, arriving to watch the final dogs and present the awards. The quality of work continued, although some dogs needed more whistle than they would

“... once again we were treated to Her Majesty’s presence, arriving to watch the final dogs and present the awards.”

have liked. A cock bird rose from a rough grassy bank and was lightly hit, with nobody able to mark the fall. Shaun McGrath’s dog was sent in its direction as both judges and handler moved forward to the brow of the hill and watched the dog work. Unfortunately, he was called up, and two more dogs were asked to try, also failing to make anything of it. The judges decided to keep Shaun in as no one really saw the bird down or the direction in which it ran. This, to me, was very positive and sensible judging. I was particularly impressed by Ian Openshaw, a true dog man and shooting man, who reads the dogs and the game so well as a judge.

Soon after, a hare was shot on the left of the line, which was picked by Shaun’s dog after a few whistles, before Tim Brain finished off with a two dog eyewipe – a great way to end the final day.

The long walk back to the cars and the anticipation of the presentation is always an exciting but nerve-racking time. Everyone is trying to guess who has won, going over what they had seen and what they hadn’t...

Her Majesty was waiting for the presentation by the time we arrived back. With 100 or more people crowded around the tent, the faces of the remaining handlers were a picture. A great place to be but only one person would be the newly crowned champion.

Richard King with FTCh Saxaphone Brown Ale of Lincswoods



RESULTS

1st Richard King with FTCh Saxaphone Brown Ale of Lincswoods

2nd Shaun McGrath with FTCh Waterford Hallmark

3rd Tim Brain with Flypatch Alfa

4th Andy Latham with FTCh Rimrock Hurricane

Certificates of Merit

- Mr. D. Marx with FTCh Lockthorn Tara

- Mr. D. A. Rees with FTCh Jobeshill Ragnar of Flypatch

- Mr. T. Prentice with Hitowngreen Diamond Joe of Findpoint

- Miss K. Cousins with FTCh Levenghly Malusi

- Mr. W. Steel with Denbrig Ace of Spades

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to the IGL and to Anne Greaves for her help and understanding in allowing me to see as much of the dog work as possible; to the judges over the three days; the headkeeper Peter Clayton and, of course, to Her Majesty The Queen.

UNDER RUBENS' CEILING



This year's Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust Annual London Ball took place underneath the splendour of Rubens' ceiling at Banqueting House, Whitehall. Two hundred and fifty guests were treated to champagne, Sipsmith cocktails and perfectly cooked venison, before Duncan Moir of Allsop conducted a live auction of holidays and some of the country's best shooting. Chairman of the ball, The Hon. Henry Broughton gave a rousing speech on the importance of the money raised for the GWCT; the audience heard his call and delivered by raising an impressive £120,000.



Tim Weller, Sally & Robin Bowie



Stephen & Kelly Partridge-Hicks, Sosephin Malinowski & Jason McIntosh



Michael & JoJo George, Rebecca Shelley, Richard Stow & Viscount Crichton



Andrew Watkins-Ball & Johnny Stevenson



Ed Boyce & Charlie MacNicol



An auction lot under the throne canopy



Caroline Roddis, Jennifer &
Ryan Thomas & Julia Kirkham



Martin Jenkins &
Jeremy Eakin



Bidding in
the auction



Phil Sutton & Jamie
Frere-Scott



Julia Kirkham &
Chris Dewbury



Aurelie Lauduique
& Richard Ali



The Hon. Henry Broughton

BICENTENARY CELEBRATIONS

In November, James Purdey & Sons celebrated their 200th birthday, inviting London's finest gunmakers and shooting industry partners to their base in Audley Street, Mayfair. The event marked the turn of the third century of Purdey's gunmaking heritage and future.

Guests enjoyed a selection of game canapés, including roast pigeon and braised pheasant, with whisky-infused hammer-ejector cocktails and champagne.

"While we look back with pride on 200 years of gunmaking, I hope our future developments and commitment to craftsmanship will play a key role in reinforcing London's long established reputation of gunmaking excellence," said Richard Purdey, former chairman.



Richard Purdey, James Horne & Nigel Beaumont



Audley House



Alix Robson & Steve Edge



Christian Morrow & Charlie Thomas



Nigel Beaumont & Rozeanne Bell



Bob Nicholls, Nigel Beaumont, Rozeanne Bell & Russ Nicholls



Richard Ali & Charles Nodder



Ian Andrews & Daryl Greatrex



Anne-Marie & John Harrison

DOUBLE GOLD AT PURDEY AWARDS

The Purdey Awards for Game and Conservation, held in November at Audley House in Mayfair, recognised the outstanding conservation work of shortlisted entries spanning the length and breadth of the country.

This year, entries from both Allargue, a 5,000-acre moorland estate in Aberdeenshire owned by the Farquharson and Forbes families, and Rectory Farm, a 150-acre mixed livestock holding near Buckinghamshire, owned by George Eaton, both achieved identical total marks from the panel of judges to become joint Gold Award winners.

Both were presented with the coveted Purdey Awards Shield and a cheque for £4,000, by celebrated chef Albert Roux OBE.

Bronze Awards were presented to the Saham Hall Shoot in Norfolk, owned by Kevin Bowes, and the Coleby Shoot in Lincolnshire, owned by Gerald Needham.



Richard Purdey with his daughters, Annika Brocklehurst (left) & Kristina Everest



Dickie Nicholson & Piffa Schroder



Albert Roux OBE



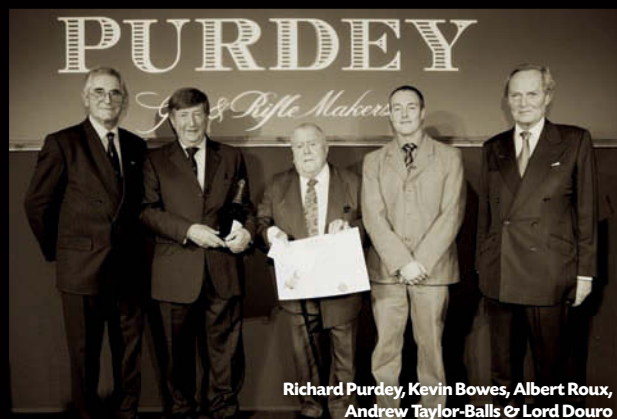
Hamish Macdonald Lockhart



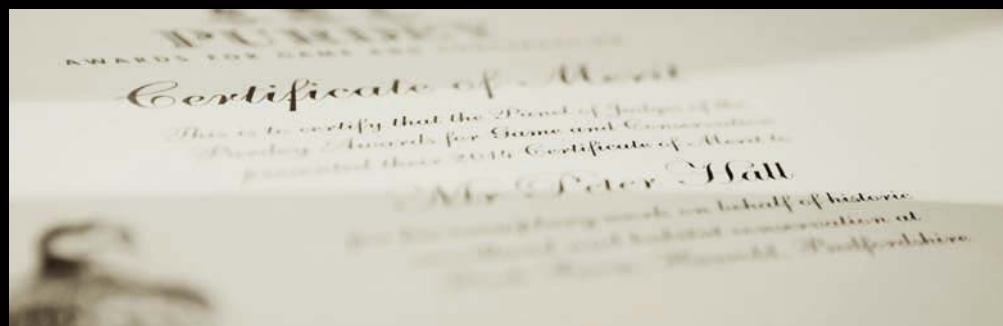
Bertie Hoskyns Abrahall



Chris Hunter & Matt Ellengen of Purdey



Richard Purdey, Kevin Bowes, Albert Roux, Andrew Taylor-Balls & Lord Douro



Marcus Janssen & Richard Ali

SPORTING PEOPLE

GLAD RAGS & CARTRIDGE BAGS

Scotland's first all-female shooting club, Glad Rags & Cartridge Bags, was launched with a bang in late November at the Raemoir House Hotel, Banchory, Aberdeenshire. Thirty ladies, some of whom had never picked up a gun before, gathered for the club's inaugural event.

After coffee and bacon rolls, the day began with basics on gun safety and the importance of gun fit, courtesy of coach David Burgess and his colleagues,

before guests were split into three groups for tuition and a competition – the winner taking home a BMW coupé for the weekend.

A fine lunch followed the morning's activities, offering a chance for all participants to enjoy some of the freebies that were kindly provided by the club's sponsors, John Clark Motor Group, Jamieson & Carry, Heavenly Hampers, Cairngorm Sporting Supplies, Orvis and Trend Magazine.



Sylvia & Laura Pike



Camilla Bates



The team



Dawn Hewes & Frank Henderson



Vikki Mac, Robbie Jillan MacFarlane,
Christian Duncan & Liz Marchant



Carol Davidson, winner of High Gun



Glad Rags & Cartridge Bags ladies



Caroline Bates, Most Improved Novice



Event organiser Mhairi Moriss & Julian McHardy of
Cairngorm Sporting Supplies

HASTE YE BACK

Specialist PR agency Tweed Media recently launched its first ever short film at the Leica Studio in Mayfair. Entitled 'Haste ye back,' the film documents the personal investment associated with the challenge of a Macnab.

The 12-minute film follows Simon and Selena Barr in the dramatic Scottish Highlands as they try in earnest to catch a salmon on the fly, shoot a brace of grouse and take a stag on the hill – all between dawn and dusk.

On the night, guests enjoyed Macnab canapés, King's Ginger cocktails and bagpipe music. Artists Sebastian Wylder and David Cemnick also brought along their stunning bronze Macnab sculpture.

The film can be viewed on YouTube.



The Macnab bronze sculpture by Cemnick and Wylder Fine Art



Michael Agel & Charlotte Sainsbury-Plaice



Andrew Venables, John Hunter, Rebecca Green, James Marchington & Helena Venables



Selena & Simon Barr



On location – filming on the River Orchy



Alastair MacGugan playing the pipes outside the Leica Studio



Charlotte Bligh, Hannah Calcutt, Clare Lingfield & Lucy Jenkins



Natalie Lake, Charlotte Sainsbury-Plaice, Hannah Long & Hattie Lake



John Hunter & Charlie Thomas

MERRY IN MAYFAIR

Christmas 2014 came early for the Zambuni PR team and friends, as they hosted a drinks and canapés party in late November to ring in the festive season.

The event started at the Punchbowl in Mayfair, where Zambuni PR's closest friends gathered to enjoy a fine selection of cocktails and canapés – including quail eggs and venison with rocket on pastry – created by headchef Nathan Andrews.

In true Christmas spirit, the evening carried on to Home House on Portman Square. A merry evening was had by all.



Laura Bott, Monica Bird, Claire Zambuni, Kathryn Fensterstock & Agnieszka Jarzebska



Charlie Jacoby & John Gregson



Judith Murray & Warwick Wyschenk



Karen Hargreaves & Amanda Congreve



Richard Mabbitt & Michael Genville



Charlie Mills, Harry Mills, Hamish Musker, Kathryn Fensterstock & Nick Mills



Charlotte Metcalf, Nick Crean & Laura Bott



Bruce Fielding, Michael Genville & Nick Holt



Chris Castle & Steve Jones



Barry Cain, Myles Levy & Mark Ackerman

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IRONING OUT YOUR FAULTS

Marcus Janssen visited Bisley Shooting Ground where shooting manager John Heagren put his technique under the microscope.

A VISUAL DILEMMA

Rupert Godfrey gets in touch with award-winning sports optometrist Ed Lyons to discuss eye dominance.



WITH HIGH BIRDS IN MIND

English-built side-by-side shotguns have a proven pedigree... but they weren't designed with 60-yard pheasants in mind. We are talking over-under territory, as Chris Batha explains.

IN PRAISE OF PRACTICE

Why Simon Ward is a great advocate of polishing your shooting skills.

REFLECTIONS

Simon Ward looks back on a season which brought its highs and lows, and reflects on where we went right – and wrong.

HIGH, WIDE AND IMPOSSIBLE?

We all want to be presented with high pheasants, but are we really up to them? Rupert Godfrey is concerned that some Guns are not showing sufficient respect for their quarry.

SHOT STRINGS EXPLAINED

There's more to a pattern of shotgun pellets than you might think, as Simon Ward explains.

JUDGING RANGE

Mastering the art of judging range, line and speed is vital to good shooting, whether you are shooting sporting clays, woodpigeons, or game, says Simon Ward.

IT'S ALL IN THE FEET

Chris Batha looks at the two main styles taught by modern shooting schools for taking really high pheasants, and asks the question: which one is more effective?

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AND FINALLY...



Man's best friend

For many of us, a working dog increases our enjoyment in the field ten-fold.

Her tail wags incessantly as she pads steadily down the hall and into the living room, turns at the hearth and sinks slowly onto her side in front of the crackling fire, warming her bared underside. Her eyes milky with cataracts, face peppered with grey whiskers.

The gun cabinet keys chime, rousing her from a light slumber as a wave of excitement courses through her tired body, just as it did on her first day out, all those years ago. But her working days are done, she is retired, the last of her outings beside the peg, in the hide, amongst the hedgerows, behind her.

A twinge of inevitable guilt touches her master as she heaves herself onto all fours and nuzzles into his hand, watching as he fills

his cartridge bag, slips his gun, preparing for an evening of sport – for the first time, now, without his trusty friend.

He leaves without her, and she doesn't understand.

The car rolls to a halt under the old oak, a brisk walk along the green lane, across a rough square of grass, bramble and regenerating ash, so often holding an old cock bird in the past. But there is no nose scouting the cool breeze for a hint of game this evening, no rhythmic gait alongside his own. The whistle he habitually hung from his neck now redundant.

He closes in on the woodland edge and a hare leaps up, streaking along its boundary, no need to watch the dog, just to 'make sure'.

He chooses his spot carefully, relieves himself of the burden of

what he carries and waits – the area beside his left knee feeling strangely vacant.

Their dark, grey silhouettes are soon floating, diving, flaring into the trees beyond, setting their wings as they come ever closer. The safety catch is pushed forward with a sharp ring, but no dog twitches excitedly at the sound, expectant of a shot, hoping for a retrieve.

The gun rises, swings and sounds, and a pigeon folds, nose-diving through the canopy to the woodland floor, where it lies still. Another soon follows. He looks down to his left as he ejects the spent cartridge, but no excited eyes stare back at him, just empty space. He will pick the birds himself.

There is a certain loneliness as he walks back to the vehicle, the last light seeping away. The bag

is stowed into the boot before departure, no wet nose framed in the rearview mirror.

The drive home offers a chance for reflection – her finest moments in the field. The snipe that fell to his gun, pocketed in the snow – no problem for her nose – her uncanny ability to mark fallen pigeons in a pea field or anticipate the flush of a woodcock from a dense thorn thicket. All cause for her name to crop-up frequently in weekend dinner-table talk.

He's home before he knows it, crunching his way across the gravelled driveway, and a familiar face, peppered with grey whiskers, stares back at him from behind the misted glass panes by the front door. She's forgiven him already.

But without her, it's just not quite the same. *WP*

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